

*And then my mum
took me to hospital*



Stories from a Baby Boomer's early life

Kevin Murray

**And then my mum
took me to hospital**

**Kevin Murray
2005**

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Dedication

I dedicate these tales to my long-suffering mother who appears to have first learnt of some of these adventures from reading the proofs of this book!

I hope now she'll understand why I didn't tell her of them at the time.

Introduction

To assist my anticipated failing memory, and to allow me to wallow in a little therapeutic nostalgia, I recently decided to commit to paper some of my early life experiences. In doing so, I was struck with the number of stories that involved misadventure, injury and/or hospitalisation. I appear to have spent a significant part of my youth with various parts of my anatomy swathed in bandages or concealed by plaster. Throw in a few genuine near-death experiences and you can readily understand the inspiration for the title of this collection.

The following stories are as true as my imperfect recollections allow – apart from the occasional necessary name changes. While some of these stories end with me being carted off to hospital, all of them reveal a glimpse into a young life that was at times innocent, at other times less so. They tell of a life that was somewhat free and adventurous, unfettered by the fear that comes with age (or by the threats of insurance claims for damages). Some tell of a child growing up in the 50's and 60's in Sydney's expanding suburbia. Some also tell of a slightly older, but not necessarily wiser, "child" still seeking adventure and courting injury well into the 70's.

Kevin Murray
2005



My first Guardian Angel (1951)

I came into this world in a hurry. “Like a cork out of a bottle,” my Mum said. As a result, my head displayed a prominent ridge of unjoined bone, providing me with a somewhat unattractive “streamlined” look. Slightly premature, I was a sickly child, suffering badly from colic. My constant screaming tested my mother’s patience to the point where she had to seek professional help. It was either that or have me put down! So my mother and I entered the Tresillian home at Chatswood for a time where she could get the necessary support and care.



A few months of this wonderful care and I was just starting to settle down when Mum had to have an operation to remove a nasty growth on her neck. So I was rapidly weaned and put in the care of a group of Catholic nuns at Wahroongah. While Mum was convalescing from her ordeal on a well-deserved (and very rare) holiday at Terrigal she got a phone call from the Wahroongah nuns to say I was terribly sick with pneumonia. In fact, they said that I was so sick that I was not expected to survive. Panic-stricken at this sudden turn of events, Mum rushed back to Sydney to find me little more than yellowed skin covering brittle bone, with the doctor telling her in hushed tones that she should steel herself for the inevitable as it was unlikely I would make it through that night.

One of the kindlier of those ever-so-kindly nuns, Sister Margaret-Mary, understood the background to my mother’s anguish... my mother had put up with so much to see me survive this far – surely, with a little help, God would not take me from her now. Sister Margaret-Mary took one look at my sad, pointy little head and for some strange reason decided I was somehow worth saving. She left word that she was to be wakened every two hours that fateful night. On each occasion she would walk across the bitter-cold courtyard to administer my medication, moisten my fevered little brow, and caress my pain-racked little body. Apparently I would accept my medicine from no one except that saintly Sister – not even from my own mother. By morning my fever had broken. Whether it was the regular doses of medicine, the strength of Sister Margaret-Mary’s compassion or the power of my mother’s all-forgiving love, something worked on that blustery night in 1951, and I happily survived to tell this and the following tales.



A sting in the tale (1955, 1974)



I am hyper-allergic to bee stings. I found this out when I was four. I rediscovered it nineteen years later.

At four years of age I helped my father build a cement fishpond in our backyard at Seaforth. We were so proud of it, and couldn't wait for the cement to cure so we could fill it with fish. The big day came. In went the hose. Dad let me turn it on. As the water slowly rose in its concrete containment, I watched as a misdirected bee flew straight onto the water's surface. I expected it to have a drink and scoot off again. But it didn't. It struggled and struggled but couldn't take off. I turned off the tap and scooped the bee up in my cupped hands. If only I could put it somewhere dry it will be able to fly home. I let the water slide through my fingers. The bee was walking on my hands now, gently tickling me with its soggy little feet. Just as I attempted to place it on the dry ground it decided to do what bees are designed to do. It stung me. I screamed in pain. My hand blew up like a balloon. I began gasping for air between the screams and the sobs. Mum came running out of the house. The hugs, the stroking, the comforting words were all very well, but the pain grew worse, and the hand grew bigger. Mum decided to take me to hospital.

At hospital they confirmed that I wasn't going to die, advising ice, calamine lotion and rest. On the way home, I had regained enough composure to ask after the bee. "Did it dry out enough to fly home, Mummy?" It was then that a realisation even more hurtful than my throbbing hand occurred. It was then that I learnt the awful truth that bees die after they inject their poison. I hadn't saved the bee - I had killed it! It seemed to my four-year-old brain that the only reward for my well-intentioned act of kindness was a dead bee and a swollen, pain-racked hand. Where's the fairness in that?



At age twenty-three I had long since learned that life wasn't fair. In fact, I was learning so much that I needed to get away for a while to gather my burgeoning, chaotic thoughts. Inspired by *Easy Rider* and fired by *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (this was the seventies) I took to the road alone on my black Jawa motorbike. "At least if I don't find myself, I'll find some nice scenery", I reasoned.

Two days into the journey and I'm already lonely. Except I can't turn back now, the *Wild One* would never admit to loneliness. I'm heading north to Narrabri, into the setting sun. Suddenly I am being pelted with a flurry of little yellow bombs. I have ridden into a swarm of bees. Most of them meet their fate splattered on the front of the Jawa, or on me, or joining the other dead insects already entangled in my beard. One, however, is caught in my helmet, still alive and obviously very angry. Another survivor seeks refuge in my right boot. I stop the bike as fast as I can, leaping from it like a man possessed, tearing at my helmet and boot. It is too late. Both bees have left their tiny pulsating poison sacs lodged deeply in my head and foot. It has been nineteen years since my last bee encounter, but that awful memory is rapidly triggered. I need to get to a town soon, in case I go into some sort of shock.

I gently remove the offending poison sacs from my skin, feeling only a little sorry this time for the suicidal bees. I manage to squeeze my boot on over my swelling foot, but I just cannot get my helmet onto my enlarging, agonising head, so it remains strapped to the handlebars. In 20 minutes I am in Narrabri. Fortunately I'm not in anaphylactic shock. I am, however, in excruciating pain. My face has now swollen so badly that I cannot talk, and I can only see out of one eye. I can't remove my right boot, so it remains unbuckled, jangling as I walk. Through the squint of my one good eye, I see a truck stop up ahead. I pull in. As I stagger through the door it seems as if everyone in the place stops what they are doing to check out this awful apparition. There I am, my leather jacket covered with splattered bees, my now-unprotected hair matted by the wind, the right side of my face the size of a football, drool dripping from the corner of my mouth into my insect-ridden beard, tongue so swollen that all I can do is grunt and mumble, limping up to the counter where I attempt to order the only food I'm capable of getting past my swollen lips – a strawberry milkshake. I'm surprised my fellow patrons didn't all race home to lock up their daughters while the Elephant Man is in town. So much for trying to be *Joe Cool*.

Through the overflow of milk slobber and drool, I manage to ask for a room – I'm far too uncoordinated to pitch my tent tonight. Surprisingly the manager agrees to let me stay. The morning after a sleepless night sees the pain reduced to tolerable levels, and the swelling stabilised. With few other choices, I decide to continue my journey. I am stopped on the outskirts of town by the Police. Through swollen lips I attempt to explain my lack of helmet. Fortunately the cop is a bike rider, so he appears to understand my plight. He lets me go.

There is probably some significant lesson to be learned from these two encounters with the painful business ends of bees. It is most likely a lesson involving the inconsistent link between kindness and its expected reward, or it's a lesson about justice and injustice, or pleasure and pain. Or maybe these were just two of life's unrelated accidents and the only lesson is a far more pragmatic one – if you're allergic to bees, avoid them at all costs!

The undefended tentacle (1959)

The biologist within me never ceases to be amazed at how minute differences in the mix of chemicals at crucial times of foetal development is all that determines whether you are to become a male or a female. That subtle hormonal message determines all of the primary and secondary characteristics that we associate with gender. One of those characteristics is the location of the gonads – ovaries in girls, testes in boys. As testosterone levels go up, so the theory says, the testes go down.

In my case, only one of my testicles appeared to have read the textbook and obeyed this hormonal imperative. The other decided to stay put in the comfort and safety of my lower abdomen. When I was five, the doctor diagnosed me as having an undescended left testicle. This unexpected uni-testicular condition was a source of great worry to my parents. Mum in particular seemed to think such a deformity would scar me emotionally for life, leading me to being publicly humiliated, shunned by society and would, most probably, turn me into a homicidal maniac, or worse. She took me to a string of doctors who, with invariably cold hands, would prod and poke my nether regions, searching for the recalcitrant testicle.

Being all of five years old, I wondered what all the fuss was about. After all, I couldn't see what possible function was being served by having even one testicle swinging cosily in its little external sack. I definitely didn't seem to miss the other one. In fact, all this medical attention was a source of some pride to me, allowing me to announce to anyone who I determined had some need to know, that I was different from other boys because I had an "undefended tentacle". I could never understand why, if my condition was so terrible, my mother would laugh so much when I revealed this unique medical condition to others.

The doctors in their wisdom had decided to give Nature and gravity a chance at fixing the problem without unnecessary medical intervention. They waited until I was eight years old to announce, after yet another series of tests usually involving cold, probing fingers, that an operation would be required. At age eight, I could at least get the testicular terminology correct, but this still didn't help much in describing my condition to my friends at school. Many of them had never heard of testicles, and needed a thesaurus to define the meaning of "undescended". Most of them, like me, were equally unaware of the reproductive function of these mysterious little spherical objects, only knowing that they were the source of some embarrassment and/or amusement when mentioned in public. After some retelling, the purpose of my impending operation was reduced to "finding my missing left knacker". This seemed to satisfy all but the most academically curious among my classmates.

There was, however, one person to whom I was very reluctant to reveal the true purpose of my imminent two weeks away from school – Brother Herbert. The rotund, balding, jocular Brother Herbert was my Third Class teacher at Marist Brothers, Mosman. He had taken a real liking to me, and had made close friends with my parents. We would invite him to dinner, to the beach, on picnics, even on family outings. Since he never asked me why I was having the operation, I assumed that Mum had told him to save me the embarrassment. Good old Mum!

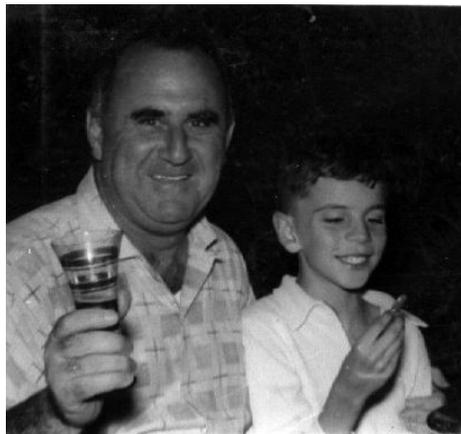
"Op Day" soon arrived. Mum drove me to the Mater Hospital. It must have been a slow day at the hospital – the nurses had little else to do but to fuss over me, making me feel terribly important. I spent most of that first afternoon as if I was on holiday from school, giving little thought to what was to happen to me the next morning. Night fell and any thoughts of school, holidays, nurses or operations began to recede behind tantalising images of food, as hunger pangs began to dominate my

thoughts. At least I quickly learned the meaning of the enigmatic “nil by mouth” sign over my bed. It meant I was to go to sleep hungry.

It wasn't a good night. I was starving. I missed my Mum. I didn't sleep well. I wet the bed. The nurses weren't quite as cheerful now. This certainly was no holiday. I was soon wheeled from the ward, prepped and drugged, with Mum whispering comforting, loving words by the bedside. The room spun pleasantly around a few times, then everything went dark.

I awoke back in my ward bed, sore and groggy. “It was a success!” Mum reported, great relief evident in her voice. She was happy now that her only son would no longer be forced to become an unwed serial killer. “Get some rest, now. I'll be back with someone special later tonight.” Before my befuddled brain could form the question to establish the identity of this mysterious “someone”, she was gone and I was happily back in the land of Nod.

By evening I was wide awake and pigging out merrily on that fabulous hospital food – demonstrating just how hungry I was! I was sore, but the mere act of survival had provided me with that “great to be alive” feeling. The nurses just kept fussing around me – bringing me second and third helpings, much to their amusement. I was busily shovelling lime jelly and ice cream into my ravenous maw when Mum appeared through the doorway, followed closely by the unmistakable, rotund, black-robed form of Brother Herbert. His resonant voice, honed by years of attempting to be heard above the roar of classrooms full of eight-year-old boys, echoed around the ward. “How's my brave little man, then?” It was great to see him. He always made me feel so special.



As the bedside conversation progressed, it was obvious that no one was interested in discussing the details of my op, which was fine by me, since I didn't know any. Mum looked most comfortable when Brother Herbert and I would discuss school, or holidays, or anything other than my testicular rearrangement. It soon came time for visitors to leave and in reaching out to shake Brother Herbert's warm, chubby hand I felt a sharp stab of pain where my left testicle used to be. The ever-attentive Brother must have noticed my pain-induced grimace, whereupon he bellowed that I should take courage from a young girl he knew who had just had exactly the same operation as myself, and who had not uttered one word of complaint. My mother's face immediately flushed bright red as she noted the bewildered looks from all the nurses and patients who were within earshot (ie, the whole ward).

A young girl? The same operation? An undescended testicle? How is that possible? My mother was clearly intending to leave these unasked questions in their unspoken state, hastily ushering Brother Herbert towards the exit, deftly avoiding any quizzical eye contact. Equally bemused, I was dying to

ask Mum what he had meant by that baffling parting statement. Were Marist Brothers really so ignorant of the differences between the sexes? With no small measure of amusement, Mum revealed all the next morning. Being too embarrassed to discuss the state of my errant left testicle with a man of God, even if it was the family-friendly Brother Herbert, she told him that I was being operated on for a far more tasteful, socially acceptable malady - an abdominal hernia.

For a man so devoted to the seeking of universal truth it seems somewhat ironic that Brother Herbert never did learn the truth about my operation. My tentacle remained forever defended from Brother Herbert's enquiry.

Just horsing around (1960)



Our family has always loved animals. At times our modest Seaforth abode was home to a virtual menagerie of creatures – dogs, cats, rabbits, budgies, tortoises, fish, tadpoles – even the occasional ant farm. But the animal that had the greatest influence on our relatively normal domestic arrangements was Smokey, my big sister Cathy’s beloved horse. For some time, Smokey was corralled in our average-sized suburban backyard. This uncomfortably close proximity of horse and human impacted our family life in numerous ways. The following tale recalls the day when Smokey’s impact on my young life was painfully real – and even left the scars to prove it!

It was a school day, but I was home sick, enveloped in the comforting warmth of my own little bed in my own little room at the end of the semi-enclosed rear veranda of our Seaforth home. Every now and then Mum would bring me food, thoughtfully mashed to ease the swallowing, or freshly squeezed orange juice. Or she would just visit for no other reason than to plant an unsolicited healing kiss on my fevered brow. Even when she wasn’t “popping in” I could hear her singing to herself as she went about her housework. Apart from the sandpaper rasping at my throat and the jackhammer pounding in my head, this could have been considered a very pleasant way to pass the time. It certainly beat going to school!

I remember lying in my bed, half asleep, listening to the distant clatter and hiss of the iron accompanying Mum’s quietly hummed medley of tunes from South Pacific, when this image of domestic bliss was shattered by the sounds of heavy footsteps and Mum shrieking “Shoo! Get out! Get out! Shoo!”

What on earth...? Unable to call out, I leapt out of bed, steadying myself against the wall as my fever-weakened heart momentarily struggled to pump enough blood to my diseased brain. Imagining our home to be invaded by gun-toting hooligans intent on robbery and/or mayhem, I armed myself, somewhat inadequately as it turns out, with my wooden school ruler and emerged coughing and shaky but fearless onto the veranda. Once my eyes had adjusted to the light, the cause of my mother’s anguished screams became immediately apparent. We had been invaded not by thieves, but by an escaped horse –Smokey.

The immensity of Smokey’s grey-speckled rear end appeared to occupy half of the veranda, with his head and shoulders poking through the kitchen doorway. The considerable width of his shoulders had

wedged him in the narrow doorway, preventing him from making his inquisitive way further into the house. Mum continued to shout at Smokey, who was not the least bit interested in what she had to say. He was far more interested in the loaf of bread that lay just beyond his reach on the kitchen table.

I edged my way cautiously past Smokey's vast rump, around to the small window on the other side of the door. Through it I could now see that Mum was accompanying her frantic screams with an equally frantic display of arm waving, flapping a freshly ironed tea-towel in the general direction of Smokey's menacing head. Two thoughts immediately entered my befuddled brain. The first was "I'm glad we weren't being attacked by hooligans. We might have had a hard time fighting them off with a tea-towel and a 12 inch wooden ruler!" The second was "Why would anyone bother to iron a tea-towel?"



Such thoughts, however, quickly passed as I was urged to turn my mind to more pressing problems, voiced concisely, though loudly, by my Mum. "Kevin. Get that wretched horse out of my kitchen!"

Keen to please, I struck Smokey's flank with my ruler, adding my raspy, feeble voice to Mum's. "C'mon, shoo! Get outta there!" Smokey's only reaction was to wedge himself further into the doorway. Clearly we needed a more effective strategy. Mum decided to seek external advice. She phoned my Dad.

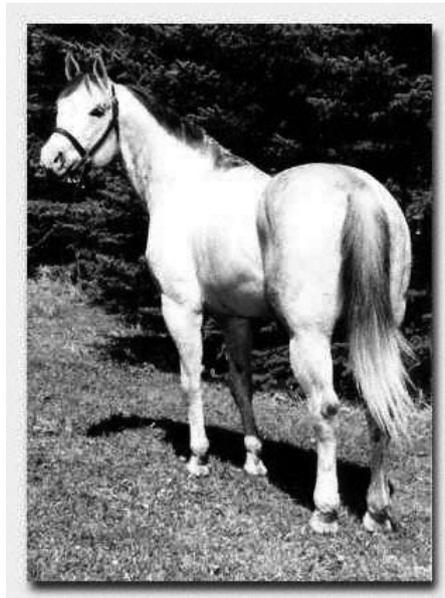
Now, my father was not the kind of man who willingly involved himself in the more mundane aspects of family life. In fact he spent a large proportion of his time immersed in his work, avoiding the family altogether. So, naturally, he didn't take too kindly to being interrupted in the middle of an important business meeting by his near-hysterical wife ranting something about a feral horse in her kitchen. His advice was exasperatingly curt. "Deal with it yourself!" We would have to fall back on our own devices once more.

It slowly dawned on us that since it was bread that enticed Smokey into the kitchen, maybe we could use the bread to entice him out. Mum passed the loaf to me through the window. Smokey's head turned, following the bread. "I think this might just work, Mum," I croaked. I tore off a chunk of crusty bread and offered it on a flattened, outstretched hand, just as my sister had taught me. Smokey gobbled it up. It looked as if we had clearly found the source of Smokey's motivation. Unfortunately, Smokey couldn't actually work out that in order to get the rest of that delicious loaf, he would need

to go into reverse. In fact, reaching around to get his head to the window only served to wedge him more tightly in the doorway.

Perhaps if I waved the bread around just beyond his reach, he would realise that moving further inside would actually take him away from his tasty goal and he would discover that reversing was the only solution? It soon became apparent that neither my mother nor myself had the faintest grasp of horse psychology. Nevertheless, Mum urged me to continue – she realised that we had no other plan!

So I persisted, alternately teasing Smokey by waving the loaf around just beyond his reach, and feeding him a small morsel just to demonstrate what he was missing out on by not reversing fully out of the kitchen. It was in the third or fourth instance of this taunt-and-reward cycle that Smokey finally decided to vent his growing frustration. As before, he moved his massive head toward the proffered bread, but instead of eating it he rapidly jerked his head beyond it and chomped down hard on my outstretched upper arm. I screamed in pain, simultaneously aggravating my raw throat and dropping the remains of the loaf onto the veranda. Mum screamed much louder. “Oh my god. What have I done?” (In the true spirit of maternal martyrdom, Mum usually blamed herself whenever anything stupid happened in her vicinity, regardless of the real culprit).



Unable to get to me via the horse-obstructed doorway, Mum directed me to go around to the front door. Grasping my bruised and bloodied arm and feeling a little more delirious as the flu symptoms kicked in even further, I squeezed past Smokey’s gyrating rump and staggered around to the front of the house, clad only in my pyjamas. I was met at the front door by a very worried looking mother who set about cleaning and bandaging the wound. At least my injury had taken her mind off the horse now demolishing the veranda in his attempts to get at the recently discarded bread.

By the time my sister had arrived home from school, I was back in my sickbed, nursing a very painful arm along with my flu-induced sore throat and sore head. Mum had completed the ironing (naturally) and had collapsed onto the lounge in search of a moment or two of peace. And Smokey had finally figured out how to reverse – to be at last rewarded by that elusive loaf of bread. He had also figured out how to get off the veranda – a solution obviously discovered through a prolonged process of trial and error, judging by the mess of upturned shelves, dismembered pot plants and splintered wood he left behind. Cathy calmly led Smokey back into his enclosure and, as was her endearing way, lectured us sternly on the inappropriateness of feeding bread to her horse.

Within a week my flu had passed and I was back at school, but for some time after I was able to proudly display on my upper arm the clear indentations of four huge incisors, bearing silent witness to the day I saved my Mum from that unexpected and decidedly unwelcome equine home invasion.

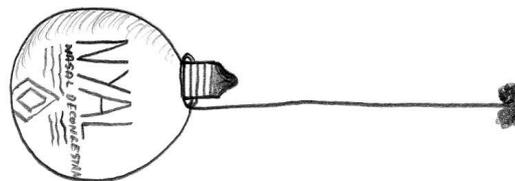
A cracker of a time (early 60's)

It has to be genetic, I think. It seems that every little boy inherits a fascination with fire, generally, and fireworks, specifically. Naturally, I was no exception to this apparent biological imperative. However, when this attraction to all things flammable is combined with an unhealthy penchant for trial and error experimentation, the resultant mixture is often, quite literally, explosive.

Consider the occasion when Midge and I decided to construct our own flamethrower. Not for us the wimpy water pistols of our compatriots. No, we yearned for something much more destructive and spectacular. How about, instead of shooting water we were able to shoot real flames? Thus the experimental phase began.

At first we tried petrol in our water pistol, intending to ignite it with a match as it exited the nozzle. The imperfect seals in the plastic gun soon became even more imperfect under the influence of the corrosive, volatile liquid semi-contained within, leaking fuel all over our hands, making the striking of and applying of the lit match to the nozzle somewhat risky... even our pyromaniacally-inclined brains could work that one out! Besides, it proved difficult to aim while holding a lit match in front of the gun – a match which all too often would go out before even igniting the toxic stream of fuel. There had to be a better way.

To eliminate the leaky bits in the water pistol we needed a “squirtable” container with no moving parts. Our solution came courtesy of a popular TV advertisement. At that time a product called Nyal Decongestant was being actively pushed via a series of TV ads, the central feature of which was a yellow ovoid container made of soft plastic, containing the liquid decongestive ingredient, which people were urged to squirt up their nose via a very thin nozzle which “atomised” the spray. Atomised - that’s what we were after! This looked ideal for our flamethrower, and I knew that mum’s bathroom cabinet held a couple of bottles of the stuff – she would hardly miss one of them would she?



Next we had to solve the problem of igniting the stream of petrol. Having it “atomised”, we surmised, would be an advantage here... the “solid” stream of petrol emanating from the water pistol had proved well nigh impossible to light. We devised an ingenious (although some might say stupid) system involving a wad of petrol-soaked cotton wool bound tightly at the end of a 15cm length of coat-hanger wire, the other end of which was entwined tightly around the nozzle of the Nyal Decongestant bottle. The intention was to first ignite the cotton wool and align the whole contraption so that the stream of atomised petrol from the nozzle would pass over the flames. It all seemed so logical. How could it fail?

Driven much more by boyhood bravado than by any thoughts for personal safety, Midge and I argued over which of us would try it first. Reasoned argument not being the strong suit of 12 year old boys, we agreed to decide it on a coin toss. I won (or lost, depending on your perspective).

I carefully filled the Nyal container with the red volatile fluid, attached the wire-bound white plastic nozzle and dipped the cotton wool into the remaining petrol. Imagining flames of gigantic proportions (like we'd seen in those ubiquitous war movies), we ventured outside (yes, we were doing all of this under our house!) and set fire to the cotton wool. It burnt more fiercely than we had anticipated, but to our juvenile minds this was a good thing!

I gingerly rotated the container so the flame from the cotton wool was directly below where we predicted the petrol stream to be, safely aimed at my father's recently erected, and clearly non-flammable, Besser Brick wall, and I squeezed. Suddenly we were confronted by an immense wall of roaring fire, shooting in a broad cone from the end of my outstretched arm. Midge fell back in shock. I froze in fear. As if honed by eons of adaptive evolution for just this moment, this particular fear response fortunately curtailed any further squeezing action and the flame miraculously disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared. The only evidence of its short-lived existence was the still smouldering wad of cotton wool on the end of a visibly shaking wire, a neat round scorch mark dead smack in the middle of my father's otherwise pristine new wall, and the looks of awe, shock and excitement on both of our faces...

"Let me try! Let me try!" was all Midge could say, once he picked himself up. Reluctant to relinquish such a valuable weapon, I nonetheless felt compelled to honour our prior agreement and carefully handed the ominously warm Nyal container to Midge. Emboldened by the success of our first firing, Midge dismissed the need for a "safety wall" of Besser Bricks and aimed into the relative vastness of our front lawn. With no little encouragement from me, he squeezed the little yellow container with considerable force. The flames shot some 6 metres from his outstretched arm, roaring like the jet engine it now so closely resembled. To our delight (and some relief) the flames and noise stopped as soon as the squeezing stopped. We both yelped in wonderment at the success of this pyrotechnic experiment, until we noticed the neat triangular scorch mark in the lawn, the apex of which was pointing accusingly at Midge (as if the near-empty container of petrol with the smouldering cotton wool extending from Midge's shaking hands was not sufficient evidence of this latest conflagration).

"At least we didn't set fire to the house!" was Midge's feeble attempt at consolation.



We never did get to use our newly created weapon in a water pistol fight, impressive though it undoubtedly would have been. In fact we didn't ever fire it again – in "anger" or otherwise. It was

sufficient to know that our ingenious design actually worked, and (my mum would no doubt add, if only she knew what we had done) that we lived to tell the tale.

But our fascination with things flammable, of course, didn't stop there. Unlike the poor, deprived children of the current generation, in the 50's and 60's we had CRACKERS. In our youth, "crackers" was a generic term used to describe any explosive substance wrapped tightly in brightly coloured paper from which a wick invitingly emerged. The shape and purpose of these dangerous little devices varied enormously... from the relatively harmless and impressively visual Catherine Wheel and the spectacular, slightly more ominous, Skyrocket, to the potentially destructive and somewhat loud "Bungers". Naturally, it was the latter type of cracker that appealed to the juvenile, male mind.

In the early 60's the King of the bungers was the "Tuppeny Bunger". Shaped and coloured like a small stick of dynamite, we could employ them to contribute to all sorts of wanton destruction. We would, however, soon tire of the relatively limited damage caused by single Tuppeny Bungers. We soon learned that their potential for havoc could be significantly increased by tightly wrapping several Tuppeny Bungers together with layers of masking tape (usually swiped from the local hardware store), combining their wicks into one.

Such an arrangement was used to send several 4 Litre tins (which in a previous existence contained sliced pineapples) skywards. It was the uncontrolled nature of their ascent – but mainly the uncertainty of their descent – that eventually caused us to abandon our attempts at placing Pineapple Tins into orbit. Especially after the incident with Mr Wilson's car roof... but I digress.

Bored with destroying inanimate objects and blasting tin cans into space, we soon graduated to terrorising living things. Not your cuddly pets, mind you. Just yabbies and fish and ants... creatures barely worth a second thought to a 9 year-old male mind. It was the last of these – ants – that wrought their rightful revenge on Johnny Young and me, however.

We had already had experience in blowing up sandcastles made especially for the occasion in the nearby quarry when we hatched the idea to explode an ants nest. It wasn't long before we had found the right one. We always passed it on our way through the bush to our favourite hideaway, a cave deep in the wilds of Bantry Bay.

We saved up for several weeks to accumulate enough Tuppeny Bungers to do the job properly... after all, we would probably only have one chance, so we had better make it worth it. In fact, we had nine, strapped together as tight as possible with several reels of masking tape. Experienced demolitionists that we were, we even made a special wick that made the length to each Bunger equal, so as to maximize the explosive power.

We had our bomb, but now faced the challenge of deploying it into the ants nest. This was, after all, no lifeless sandcastle. This was a thriving community of ferocious ants who don't take kindly to people walking by, let alone wanting to bury the ant-equivalent of of a 50 megaton bomb in their midst. Naturally enough, we devised a plan. We would find a suitable stick, sharpen one end and run over the seething ant-mound numerous times, each time thrusting the stick into the apex of the mound, making the hole slightly larger on each pass.

As unlikely as it now seems, this plan actually worked. After an hour or so of pole-vaulting back and forth over the ants nest, we had a hole sufficiently deep for us to proceed to the next part of the mission. We also had a nest full of very angry ants.

Stage Two was to drop the bomb in the hole. One more pole vault and a deftly aimed release of our unholy package saw us ready for Stage Three, filling in the hole. This we accomplished from a distance by throwing clods of earth into it. This was made somewhat more difficult than we had anticipated due to the fact that most clods of earth scraped from the environs contained one or more agitated ants, intent on finding the nearest piece of warm flesh to blame for the destructive invasion of their ant-city. Compared to the disaster that was about to befall them, we thought, you would think they would be thankful that they were away from the nest!

Johnny and I went home for lunch, to give the doomed ants a chance to re-establish their nest after the morning's disturbance. We returned early that afternoon to find literally thousands of ants hard at work repairing the damage, but in the process, unwittingly sealing the bomb within their midst. All that remained was to ignite it. Of course, all of this trouble wasn't just for our own benefit. How could we deprive our friends of the pleasure of watching destruction on such a massive scale? So joining Johnny and me on that fateful afternoon were four other boys, all of whom were fellow pyromaniacs who would no doubt be appreciative of a fine, destructive explosion. Johnny and I were already wallowing in our new-found celebrity, imagine how high our popularity stakes will go once they witness the annihilation of that offending ants nest!

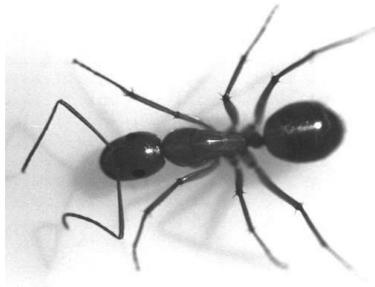
The six of us took up our observation positions, all but encircling the doomed nest, as if we could ambush any poor unfortunate survivors as they fled the destruction. I light the sparkler which was wedged firmly in the end of a long stick and pressed it to the ant-covered wick emerging from near the center of the nest. It spluttered into life. Only a few seconds now!



A single Tuppenny Bunger at close quarters is loud enough to shatter windows and burst ear drums. The unexpectedly powerful shock wave generated when nine Tuppenny Bungers explode reverberates through your entire body. It was the shock wave that struck that us just before the ants did. I was so deafened by the explosion that I could barely hear the screams from my five mates as thousands of dead, dying and belligerently live ants fell from the sky, landing in our hair, down our shirts – even in our mouths, eyes and ears. Far from the expected standing ovation from my friends for our pyrotechnic handiwork, all I could see through my own squinting eyes was them writhing in agony on the ground, trying in vain to wipe an ever increasing mass of agitated ants from their pain-wracked bodies. I ran screaming further into the bush, frantically discarding shirts and shorts as I ran, until I reached a clearing where I stood, stark naked, still desperately wiping the remaining ants from my fast-reddening skin.

I was soon joined by the others, each exhibiting a similar lack of clothes, each still swiping at both the real and the imagined ants crawling over their all-too real blotchy skin. We didn't say much... or at least I didn't hear much, with my ears still ringing from the explosion. One by one we retraced our tracks, vigorously shaking each item of discarded clothing before gingerly putting it back on. Eventually we arrived within sight of the crater where until a few minutes ago the ants nest had been. David Whitson was the first to whoop his delight at the sight of mass ant destruction. A couple of the others echoed his joy, muted as it was by the painful stings over most of our bodies.

As satisfyingly loud and impressively destructive as the explosion had been, I was unable to muster much joy. In fact I began to feel downright miserable. What had we done? From the viewpoint of the unfortunate ant, in a split second of unimaginable terror we had destroyed decades of hard work, loyalty and skill. I found myself wanting the stings to hurt even more than they did. I privately felt that I needed to be justly punished for my awful act of unthinking cruelty. Of course, I didn't reveal any of these "wussy" feelings to the others, and pretended, albeit half heartedly, to join in their celebration.



As the months passed, the crater filled in and eventually re-grew into an active ant nest – not quite as large as the previous one, but enough to satisfy me that we had not destroyed the whole colony... at least that's what I preferred to think.

While I confess to continuing to play with fire and explosives for several years after this, I have never had the heart to inflict them on any living thing, ever since the day those ants so clearly explained it all to me...

Mistaken identity (1960)

Johnny Young and I were the best of friends. Despite the fact we went to separate schools (he was a “Public”, I was a Catholic) Youngie and I spent most of our non-school hours in each other’s company. Much of this time was spent exploring the thick bushland which surrounded our adjoined houses in Seaforth. One of our most favourite hideaways in the bush was a large cave, concealed half way down the steep, thickly wooded descent to Bantry Bay. The soot embedded in its roof, the remnant fireplaces and numerous grinding grooves in the sandstone indicated that this cave had also been the favoured haunt of generations of aborigines before us – a realisation which added significantly to the magic and mystery of this place.

We would spend countless hours playing in the dark red, compacted earth sheltered beneath the vast moss-strewn overhang at the cave’s entrance. In our childhood imaginations we could be smugglers, burying our contraband in the deep recesses of our secret hideout. Or we could be pirates, preparing elaborate traps to ambush anyone foolish enough to attempt to steal our valuable booty. Or we could just as easily be civil engineers, building entire cities in the dirt, complete with buildings linked by elaborate bridges and extensive curbed roads on which our little metal toy cars would travel.

One of my most treasured toys was a little red fire truck, with its tiny steel-grey wheels and authentic-looking blackened tyres. Its crowning glory, however, was the intricate little silver ladder mounted on the roof which would actually swivel and extend. As I blissfully raced my fire truck along our cave-floor city’s broad main street, with siren screaming in response to some imaginary downtown conflagration, I could not possibly have anticipated the impact that this little toy would soon have on the people of a much larger, and far more real, city, Sydney.

In June 1960 Basil and Freda Thorne won \$100,000 in the Opera House lottery. Five weeks later their eight-year-old son, Graeme, was kidnapped and a ransom demanded. The biggest manhunt in Sydney’s history was soon mounted. Several of the clues led to our beloved Seaforth. A huge operations unit was established on parkland just 100 metres from our home, containing a veritable army of police, volunteers and the inevitable reporters. Each day, long lines of men would set off purposefully in every direction, scouring the bush for any clue that might lead to Graeme or his kidnapper.



As the days wore on, hope of finding Graeme alive dwindled. The potential for unspeakable tragedy gripped the imaginations of a very concerned city... nothing like this had ever happened in Sydney before. For days on end, newspapers carried the story on their front pages, reflecting more the communal outrage than conveying any real leads or news.

It was not unexpected, then, that when a toy, identified by Graeme's tearful mother as "definitely his", was discovered in a cave at Seaforth, its image was splashed over the front pages of every newspaper in Sydney. The level of police activity in our area suddenly increased dramatically... huge arc lights were installed so operations could continue into the night. Every house in the area (ours included) was searched, and searched again. At last there was a glimmer of hope. Graeme may be alive still! What else could explain his toys in the Seaforth bush?

However, within our own household this sense of hopefulness rapidly faded that evening - as soon as mum showed me the newspaper proudly displaying the image of Graeme's toy. It was clearly my treasured little red fire truck. This also meant that the cave which had now become the focus of a Nation's attention was none other than "our" cave. What were we to do? Obviously we would have to tell the police, and since I was the only one who could positively identify the truck it was to be up to me to do so.

I trudged nervously through the gathering dusk and persistent drizzle towards the bright arc lights so confidently penetrating the darkness up ahead. I was soon in the midst of frantic activity, much of which seemed to be centred on a green marquee the opening to which was guarded by a huge policeman whose job, I imagined, was to keep pesky little nine-year-olds away at all costs.

Clearly the person to whom I needed to confess was inside that tent, so I gathered my confidence, tugged on the guard's voluminous sleeve and in the most authoritative voice I could muster in the circumstances, asked if I could see the man in charge. Please.

Contrary to my expectation, he didn't ignore me or tell me to get lost. He merely asked what it was about. I guess the police were so desperate for leads that they were ready to listen to anyone - even scrawny, bedraggled little boys. I told him that I had some vital information about "Graeme's" fire truck. He told me to wait while he disappeared inside.

He emerged a minute or so later and asked me to go inside the tent. It was a single, large room full of people and abuzz with activity. On one side of the room was a large trestle table, covered with maps. Behind this table stood the policeman who, betrayed by both his demeanour and his gold braid, was clearly in charge. He paid not the slightest attention to me while he completed barking his orders to the half dozen men crouching attentively over the maps.

I stood transfixed by all of this, not daring to say anything. Eventually the head policeman dismissed the others, who hurried off, no doubt to spend the rest of this bleak night searching the very areas around our cave, fired with an enthusiasm that only I knew was misplaced. He beckoned to me to join him behind the table where he had now slumped, clearly exhausted, into a rickety chair. He introduced himself as Chief Inspector Neilson.

"And what can I do for you, sonny?" he wearily asked.

"I think that toy truck you found is mine."

"Is that so? And what makes you think that?" He was slightly more attentive now.



“The picture in the newspaper looks like it, and you found it in a cave where I left it. I can describe the truck to you if you like. I’m certain it’s mine. I can even describe the exact place where you must have found it. My friend and I play in that cave.”

By now the Chief Inspector was sitting bolt upright in his chair. He called over another man who, while not wearing a uniform, bore the unmistakable look of a policeman. He bent down so the Chief Inspector could whisper something in his ear. The second man kept looking at me inquisitively through squinted eyes whilst he absorbed what his boss had to say. He then hurried outside, returning a couple of minutes later with a small bag grasped firmly in his substantial hand. He ceremoniously handed it to the Chief Inspector.

Removing the truck from its package, taking care to hide it from my view, the Chief Inspector asked me to describe it. As I revealed every minute detail, etched into my memory over years of loving play, I could see the look of disappointment gradually consume his face. He slumped even lower into the chair. Clearly this was not Graeme’s truck. He asked me to describe the place where I had left it. I could have described every rock and every crevice in that cave but he soon stopped me. Obviously it was “my” cave where they found the truck. What promised to be a major lead had instantly vanished with my disturbing revelation. His disappointment was tangible.

Chief Inspector Neilson thanked me with a forlorn shake of my hand, telling me that I had done the right thing and had probably saved them precious days of fruitless searching. He then returned his attention to the table of maps, no doubt to plan a substantial redeployment based on my information. I took this as my cue to leave. However, before I did so, emboldened by his praise for my actions, I gingerly asked if I could please have my fire truck back. Surprisingly, he unhesitatingly handed it to me and gestured for me to go while he busied himself with his maps and men.

With hindsight the ease with which he relinquished the “evidence” probably indicated his lack of belief in it in the first place, and the pressure the police were under to grasp on to any possible lead, no matter how tenuous. The fact that my little red fire engine had made front page news also indicated how strongly the community felt about this case, and its anxiety for anything remotely hopeful. It was as if society as a whole had been sinned against with the cowardly kidnap of this innocent boy.

With the naiveté that comes with youth, I had expected the next day’s newspapers to be ablaze with my confession. They weren’t. In fact, I don’t recall one word about the misleading fire truck ever being printed. Either the reporters never found out, or, more likely, they only wrote what their readers wanted to read – and Sydney’s population definitely wasn’t in any mood to have their so recently raised hopes (no matter how unrealistic they might have been) dashed so soon.

Nonetheless, I felt a vague sense of pride that I was able to contribute in even this small way to the investigation, a feeling enhanced by the realisation that Graeme Thorne was a boy only slightly

younger than myself, allowing me to identify somewhat with whatever he must have been going through.

POSTSCRIPT

As the weeks passed the intensity of the search decreased, despite the substantial rewards on offer, and fears for Graeme's life grew. On August 16 the worst of these fears were realised – Graeme's decomposing body was found half buried under a ledge in the Seaforth bush only about two kilometres from our homes. All of Sydney went into deep mourning.

Two months later the murderer (Stephen Bradley) was captured.

Youngie and I continued to play in our wondrous cave, but gradually those carefree days in that little make-believe world somehow lost their appeal, and were progressively replaced with other pursuits. It was as if after the grim reality of kidnap and murder in our own neighbourhood some of the innocence and joy of childhood had been taken forever from us.

A curly situation (1962)



Having fictional characters as role models for an impressionable young boy was usually a recipe for disaster. Suitably inspired by *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, my mate Midge and I embarked on a nautical adventure of our own that didn't quite turn out as planned.

Keen to explore the terrain around our new home at Harbord, Midge and I would spend long days wandering the neighbourhood seeking adventure (or "trouble", if you believed my Mum). One likely looking spot, which drew us back time and again, was Curl Curl Lagoon. In those days it was known more accurately as "The Curly Tip", reflecting its more utilitarian role as a repository of local rubbish. Its once pristine shores were littered with the refuse of an increasingly affluent, throw-away society, creating new habitat challenges for the few hardy waterbirds that remained, but presenting irresistible possibilities to two young boys with images of Huckleberry Finn in their heads.

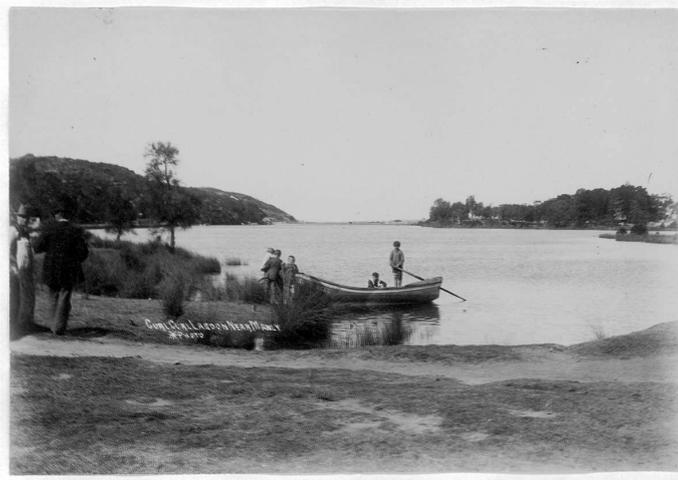
Our plan, on that hot summer's day, was to build ourselves a fabulous raft and cruise majestically down the lagoon to its distant exit to the blue Pacific through the sands of Curl Curl Beach. Building the raft was not going to be too difficult, we reasoned. The abundance of possible materials in the form of discarded paint tins, oil drums, timber, mattresses, cupboards, etc, meant we were spoiled for choice. We would only be limited by our imaginations. We soon found that we were more severely and practically limited by the Curl Curl mud. Picturing our grand design in our heads was one thing. Dragging the necessary structural components through the thick, sticky, black mud was something entirely different. Assembling them into a likeness of our dream raft was nearly impossible.



We spent that whole morning squelching through that slimy, stinking goo, manoeuvring planks of wood and oil drums into position so we could tie them together with strands of decayed rope. As if movement through the mud wasn't restrictive enough, the summer sun dried the mud caked over us, attempting to set us like statues. At least the caked-on mud lessened the sandfly bites.

By midday we were exhausted, but we had created something that loosely resembled a Twain-inspired raft - at least in our eyes. We had managed to lash together four largish oil drums, each, unfortunately, of a different size. Positioned atop this asymmetry of drums was a framework of fence palings, from which we had successfully extricated most, but unfortunately not all, of the protruding nails. On top of this rested the highly modified remains of a large inlaid timber wardrobe, its base standing upright, offering an essential visual indicator to the front of a craft which otherwise possessed no feature suitable to distinguish its bow from its stern. We stood back from our creation and congratulated ourselves on our obvious skill.

A few hefty shoves through the black ooze and our awkward-looking vessel was afloat. Its lack of rigidity and its inherent asymmetry became immediately apparent once set free from the semi-solidity of the shore. It bore much more resemblance to a work of modern sculpture than to a feat of marine engineering, but it was our passport to adventure so what did we care that it possessed not one straight line or level surface. Nevertheless, we were forced to make a few minor structural adjustments once it was afloat - like re-attaching the drum that clearly desired to part company with the others, and rotating the other drum whose lid proved to be less watertight than we had hoped.



With everything now shipshape we scrambled aboard. Free at last from the mud's deadly suction and drifting slowly into slightly cleaner waters, we were tempted to jump for joy. Aware, however, of the frailty of the clashing, groaning structure beneath us, we restricted our celebration to a mutual backslap and a yelp of pleasure.

Our pleasure was short lived, however. Our proud little craft began to take on a decided list to starboard. Since it appeared to list in all directions anyway, it took us a while to detect this more pronounced leaning. The drum with the leaky lid was, who would have guessed it, leaking. Badly. Disappointed, we paddled our way back to shore, once more renewing our unhappy acquaintance with the dreaded Curl Curl mud. Undaunted by this minor setback, we agreed that only a few modifications would be needed and we could set off once more. We had tasted the freedom of the seas and it was far too enticing for us to be put off by anything as trivial as a raft that falls apart.

We found a more secure lid for the offending drum and took the opportunity to make one further modification. Our short journey had revealed the discomfort of sitting atop the unforgivingly hard surface of an unstable wardrobe. We decided that since the more pragmatic, structural needs of our craft were now resolved, we needed a bit of luxury. This came in the form of a long-discarded mattress, which we hurriedly tied on top of the wardrobe. Ah, Huckleberry Finn never had it this good!

Re-launched, we pushed and paddled our newly refurbished, luxurious raft out into the middle of the lagoon. In addition to providing us with great comfort, the kapok-filled addition to our contraption served to muffle the groans of complaint from the drums and timbers below and offer some degree of protection from the occasional protruding nail. We should, however, have noticed the gradual decrease in our freeboard, but our attention was on the distant sand hills towards which we were slowly, joyously drifting.

Unbeknown to us this decrease in freeboard was the result of a number of conspiring forces... With us aboard, the edges of the previously dry mattress were now touching the water. The kapok inside the mattress acted like a wick – siphoning the lapping water deeper inside. The extra load of water depressed the drums further beneath the surface, increasing the pressure on them. The increased pressure tested the already dubious air-retaining capacities of the oil drums, causing small leaks to become larger. This in turn caused the raft to sink further, wetting the mattress even more, making it heavier, increasing the pressure on the drums, and so on, snowballing the whole sorry cycle of cause and effect.

The net result was that we found ourselves aboard a rapidly sinking, waterlogged (though comfortable) raft in the middle of Curl Curl Lagoon. It became impossible to move the raft once the mattress was beneath the surface. We knew we would have to abandon ship. We slithered off the now sodden mattress into the dark, putrid water, hoping in vain that it was shallow enough to allow us to stand. No such luck. Being too far to swim back to our launch site or to swim to the beach, we scanned the nearby land for any spot suitable for our salvation. All we could see were thick reeds guarding the beckoning shoreline - thick, impenetrable reeds concealing the odd abandoned car and other rubbish that had escaped the loose confines of the upstream Tip.

Having no other choice, we struck out for the nearest shore. Fortunately, emulating Huckleberry Finn, we were travelling light – shorts and T-shirt – so our swimming was relatively unhindered. We soon reached the outermost reeds, but this was where the struggle really began. The long, ribbon-like leaves were unexpectedly sharp and serrated, inducing deep cuts in whichever part of our rapidly tiring anatomy made contact with them. We could barely stand in the thick ooze beyond the reeds. It was too far to swim back to the Tip. And we would be risking serious injury if we were to force our way through the reeds. What were we to do?

Looking back to our recently abandoned raft suggested another alternative. Relieved of our weight, it appeared to have reached an equilibrium point in its descent to the bottom of the lagoon. At least it would provide us with support while we contemplated our next move. So we turned our backs on the killer reeds and swam back to our raft. Once committed to the raft as our only hope of salvation, we determined that it was the mattress that triggered the unfortunate cascade of events that led to the raft's sinking. So with tiring, bloodied fingers we released the mattress and, after a significant struggle, manhandled it from atop the groaning structure. Freed from the not inconsiderable weight of the saturated mattress, the raft rose just clear of the water's surface, allowing us to roll aboard and regain some of our depleted strength.

After 10 minutes or so we started paddling our semi-submerged raft back towards the Tip. We could barely make any headway, but at least we knew this plan would work – we just didn't know how long it would take. By late afternoon we were starting to wonder if we would ever make it when the nor'easter kicked in, ruffling the water around us and stirring up the papers in the distant Tip. Seeing the ease with which the wind shifted this previously immobile rubbish is probably what gave us the idea... We unleashed the wardrobe and upended it. Midge and I both sat, half submerged, on the protruding bit on the wardrobe's end, leaving the taller piece reaching skywards as a rigid sail to catch the building breeze. We were soon moving through the water at substantial speed, and in the right direction. We would soon be saved!

Within 50 metres of our launch site, however, our brave little raft could no longer stand the strain of its newfound propulsion system. Its gradual disintegration climaxed with a total collapse, leaving us with another tiring swim to shore. We eventually hauled ourselves out onto that recently maligned, but now marvellous life-saving mud, bruised, bloodied, filthy and exhausted. The remnants of our once proud vessel rapidly became indistinguishable from the rubbish around them.

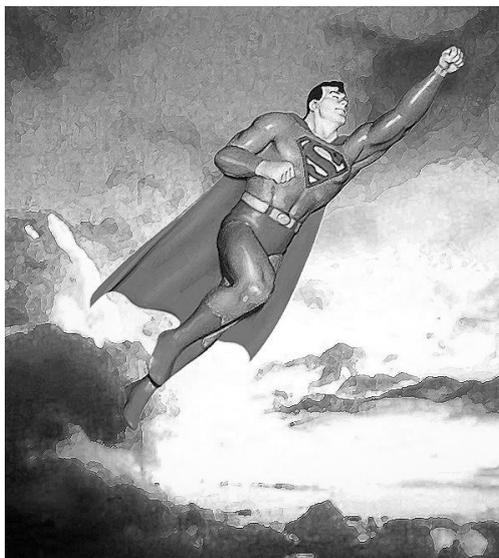
We were right back where we started, but we had come a long way to get there.

Flights of fantasy (1958-1963)



Ever since I was exposed as a young child to the wonderful, magical, inspirational world of Peter Pan I have wanted to fly. Undeterred by any law of physics that so boringly determined that flying under one's own power was logically impossible, I made several brave, though foolhardy attempts to defy the inevitability of gravity. Needless to say, these attempts were not quite as successful as the effortless ease with which Peter Pan soared through the air.

As a child I readily snubbed those stuffy, encyclopaedic tomes bulging with complex theories of flight. They all made flying seem far too difficult. Back then my major sources of inspiration and information were comic books, where flight was more-or-less just taken for granted. As a role model for flight, however, Peter Pan was soon superseded by Superman, who was vastly more appealing to a 7-year-old boy with a flight fetish. Not only could Superman fly at great speed, he was "able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, and had the power of 10 locomotives". What more would you want in a superhero?



I discerned that Superman would be indistinguishable from mere mortals if not for his distinctive suit – especially that fabulous red cape. I just had to have one. I pestered Mum until she finally agreed to create one on her brand new Helvetia sewing machine. I was soon the ever-so-proud owner of a snazzy blue suit with red pants and a flowing red cape with a huge Yellow “S” emblazoned on both cape and shirt. I so loved that suit that I wanted to wear it everywhere (Mum drew the line at me wearing it to Church, however). I felt truly invincible with it on. I even felt like I could fly...

I was pretty sure (and disappointed) that I had not come from the planet Krypton, so I was aware that I couldn't just ascend effortlessly from ground level like my comic-book superhero, so I determined that I needed a bit of a head start. I concluded that the garage roof would be both accessible and high enough. I imagined myself leaping from the roof, cape streaming impressively behind, arms outstretched, gliding majestically to the grass below or, even better, actually swooping skywards before reaching the ground. I saw myself cruising effortlessly above the rooftops, looking down at those poor souls who have been brainwashed into believing in gravity and all of its unnecessary restrictions. “Hey, look up here”, I would shout. “I can fly just like Superman!”

Of course, the reality of my first flight was a little different. I waited for a suitable parent-free moment and took the opportunity to fetch the ladder from the garage and climb onto the garage roof. Once up there, it did look a tad high, but I convinced myself that the extra height would merely give me more time to pick up speed for the soaring flight to come. I carefully adjusted the cape around my neck and double-checked the knot. I would have preferred a running leap but the slope of the roof prevented any run-off, so I stood poised on the roof's edge, arms outstretched as if I were about to dive into a pool. One last look around to ensure there were no witnesses (Superman always takes off in secret), and I duly launched myself into mid-air. For a split second I really felt the sheer joy of flying, then I really felt the hard impact of the lawn.

The very un-Superman-like scream of pain brought my Mum running from the house. My left ankle was already twice its normal size. Only too aware of the chalkiness of my bones, Mum was pretty sure it was broken. Chastising and consoling me at the same time, as only mothers can, Mum bundled me into the car and drove me to hospital, where X-rays fortunately revealed only a severe sprain. Lying in agony on the rear seat, I pensively untied the knot around my neck, trying to determine where my calculations had gone wrong. It took me a while before I attempted to defy gravity once more, but by then I had figured it out. I needed that run-off, and I needed the right sort of terrain beneath me.

Just over 3 years later, both of these essential ingredients came together in the form of the sand dunes behind Curl Curl beach. I had calculated that if I ran fast enough along the sand dune's ridge, and perfectly timed my headfirst leap off the edge, my trajectory should exactly match the contour of the sloping sand, allowing me to glide for some distance just above the sandy surface. It wouldn't exactly be Superman, but it would be like flying.

Throughout those intervening years I experienced a recurring dream which was so intense and vivid that it seemed almost real. In it I would see myself gliding smoothly through the air above slopes of increasing size. I even recall anticipating Isaac Newton (300 years too late, though) by dreaming of soaring down a slope equal to the curvature of the Earth. I would not only be flying, I would be in orbit!

This obsessive desire for flight was always a very private fantasy of mine. I spent several afternoons alone perfecting my carefully concocted “flying” technique on the smaller dunes at Curl Curl. To my delight, it looked like my plan might actually work. Of course, it always seemed to work much better

when I wore a cape, but, having outgrown my Superman cape, and fearing more embarrassment than was necessary, I tied a red beach towel around my neck and just imagined the “S” imprinted on it. Fortunately, the sand proved somewhat softer than the Seaforth lawn, so few injuries were incurred during these practice runs. That is, until I decided to test my theory on the largest of the Curl Curl dunes...

It was a balmy summer’s afternoon early in 1962. I rode my bike alone to North Curl Curl determined to fly down the large dune that marked the entrance to Curl Curl Lagoon. The dune was a good 10 metres high, its variable gradient determined by the proximity of its slope to the eroding waters of the out flowing lagoon. This dune was to be ideal for a spectacular flight. All I needed to do was to determine the slope that would most closely match my anticipated trajectory, run like blazes to the edge and dive headfirst down the slope. I had it all worked out to the finest detail. Nothing could stop me from flying now.

So, with the appropriate calculations performed, and the direction of my take-off determined, I ceremoniously tied the red beach towel around my neck and started my run. The dune’s edge loomed rapidly ahead. On reaching the edge I deftly performed a most majestic swan dive into the abyss beyond. Looking below me I could see the sand rushing by. I truly was flying. Looking ahead, I could see the hard, wet sand of the lagoon’s delta. I truly was falling. I speared hands first into the hard ground. My left hand was bent backwards by its sudden contact with the compacted sand. I thought I actually heard the crack as my chalky little wrist bones gave way under the impact. I soon tumbled to a standstill, thrilled at the flight but wracked with pain. I struggled back up the dune, clambered aboard my bike and slowly rode home, from where Mum took me to hospital. I told her I had fallen from my bike. I was never game enough to reveal the real cause of that particular fracture, thinking that others might not fully understand or appreciate my attempts at emulating Superman.

Disappointed with my efforts at “unassisted” flight, I began to investigate the possibilities of mechanical assistance. I did so reluctantly because it always felt like cheating, and was somehow less “pure” than being held aloft by little more than a red cape and a strong belief. However, I had always been fascinated with machinery. My most treasured possession, as a child, was a Meccano set. Many of my Meccano creations were powered by a small steam engine, which I also loved dearly. One of my most successful Meccano assemblies was a steam-driven miniature hovercraft, which actually jerked its way uneasily across the kitchen linoleum for at least a couple of metres before tipping over and catching fire. Sure, it wasn’t really “flying”, and I wasn’t on board, but at least it tested out a few theories that I was to put into place on a much larger scale a few years later...



It was in 1963 that I decided to build a life-size gyrocopter. Inspired by an article in *Popular Mechanics*, my dreams of soaring down slopes were soon replaced by dreams of cruising the skies beneath a whirling propeller, driven by a small engine attached to my seat. The world would literally be at my feet. Who could resist such a promise of ultimate freedom? Certainly not me.

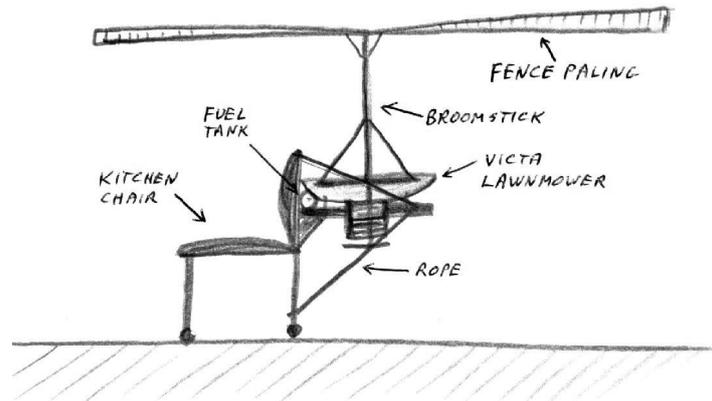
There were, however, a few obstacles to my realisation of this new dream. These obstacles included lack of money, lack of propeller and lack of engine. Some might unkindly say “and lack of sense”, but I never saw this as an obstacle, more as a liberator of my imagination. To anyone driven by obsessions such as this, obstacles are perceived merely as minor inconveniences, and I had soon concocted a plan to overcome each one. The gyrocopter frame would be one of our old metal kitchen chairs. The propeller would be fashioned out of a hardwood fence paling, soaked in water and twisted slowly into shape, in the same way as I had made Paddle-Pop-stick propellers for my model aeroplanes. And the engine? Dad’s two-stroke Victa lawnmower, of course.

Naturally, I had to work on this project in secret. I knew that such an ambitious scheme would be easily misunderstood, especially by non-believing parents. I relieved a suitable fence paling from the new subdivision across the street and soaked it in water trapped in the blocked-off gutter behind our house. After a week of soaking I wedged one end of the paling into a crack in the side wall of our house and twisted the other end with a small tower of bricks. A week later the timber had dried into its permanently contorted shape. I had my propeller.

Launch day had arrived. I first mowed the lawn to remove any suspicion of my more ambitious plans for the lawn mower, then set about removing the wheels, blades and handles from the Victa, attaching it to a previously constructed wooden frame attached in turn to the back of the abandoned kitchen chair. I inverted the mower so the disk onto which the blades would normally attach was facing upwards, necessitating a rearrangement of the throttle cable, fuel tank and carburettor. With no welding equipment (or welding skills), my only method of attachment of both frame and mower was with rope.

All that remained was to attach the propeller to the top of the lawnmower. For this I used a broomstick. Unfortunately, the only broomstick I could lay my hands on was still in use, attached to my Mum’s broom. This meant that I couldn’t reduce its length without causing uncomfortable questions to be asked. I knew this might make my gyrocopter less stable, but I could see no other option. So I nailed (and roped) one end of the temporarily purloined broomstick to the propeller and attached the other end to the upturned lawnmower. Naturally I used lots of rope for this crucial attachment.

At last my gyrocopter was complete. My plan now was to tie myself into the seat (with more rope, of course) and pull the start-cord behind me, whereupon the trusty Victa two-stroke would roar into life, rotating the propeller with such speed that I would be triumphantly swept skywards by its awesome downward thrust. Once again, the reality was somewhat different...



I tied myself into the seat without difficulty. Pulling on the start cord, however, was to prove more troublesome. The inertia of the heavy fence paling was just too great to be overcome by the mere tugging of the start cord. I had to resort to Plan B. I untied myself from the chair and tried to start the motor by rotating the propeller more directly. I quickly realised that, freed from my weight holding the chair on the ground, the whole unstable contraption wanted to rotate with the propeller. Surprisingly, this realisation didn't alert me to the rotational stability problems I would certainly have to face once I was actually airborne. Regardless, I decided that the only way to prevent the chair from rotating beneath the propeller was to kneel on the seat, facing backwards, rotating the fence paling above my head.

It took a dozen or so increasingly energetic rotations before the motor eventually kicked into life. It was then that all Hell broke loose. The rope holding the broomstick to the mower's disk was by now so loose that the broomstick, under the influence of this sudden increase in centrifugal force, rapidly assumed a more horizontal orientation, taking the wildly gyrating fence paling with it. The rope and nails holding the fence paling to the broomstick were no match for this unexpected realignment and they soon gave way, causing the propeller to be recklessly catapulted across the yard, and the motor, freed from this weighty burden, to rev even faster. Confronted by the prospect of being ingloriously decapitated by a rapidly rotating broomstick, I leapt from the chair, diving to the ground beneath the pale blue cloud of two-stroke smoke, belching from the straining lawnmower engine. Freed once more from my stabilising weight, the chair itself was now able to join the cacophonous melee. With newfound leverage gained by spearing the broomstick into the ground beside me, the only part left free to rotate was the chair. This tipped what now remained of my gyrocopter onto its side, causing the chair to thrash wildly around the firmly attached mower like a demented wheat harvester, flailing its menacing way towards where I lay prostrate, hugging the ground for protection.

Frozen to the spot with fear, I closed my eyes, anticipating the vicious mauling I was about to receive by the runaway kitchen chair. Suddenly there was welcome silence. The now-upturned carburettor had mercifully flooded, causing the belaboured engine to stall. As the pall of two-stroke smoke cleared I took stock of the devastation surrounding me. Less than an arm's length away from me were the splintered remains of Mum's broomstick, one end still roped to the smouldering Victa, the other embedded firmly into the lawn. At my feet lay the twisted remains of the once-proud kitchen chair, still clinging tenaciously to the wooden platform attached to the mower. Over 6 metres away was the discarded propeller, resting innocently against our own fence as if begging to return to its previous dull life as a fence paling.

Fortunately, no one had thought anything of the almighty racket in the back yard that afternoon. As far as they were concerned it was "just Kevin tinkering with the mower as usual". So it was with trembling hands that I hurriedly reassembled the mower and threw all of the other incriminating

evidence of that particular near-death experience under the house. The most difficult part was explaining to Mum what had happened to her broomstick. Unwilling, of course, to reveal how it had nearly skewered me to the backyard lawn, I confessed to her that I had taken it to make a spear and it, naturally, broke. Of course I got into strife and had to pay for a new one, but at least I got to keep the embarrassing secret of my foiled gyrocopter experiment. Until now, that is.

POSTSCRIPT

Many years later, while reading the magnificently provocative *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, I found myself readily identifying with Douglas Adams's own unique formula for flying. Adams suggested that all you needed to do in order to fly was to gracefully fall forward but become distracted just before your face hit the ground. Thinking that this may have been the missing ingredient from my own personal battles with gravity, I'm currently working on a plan to test this intriguing theory. It certainly sounds very plausible to me...

The puny pugilist (1963)

It's 1963 and I've just entered "Big School". This means that I have moved from Fifth Class at Marist Brothers Mosman to Sixth Class at Marist Brothers North Sydney. More importantly for this story, it means that my whole class has moved from being at the top of the school to being once more at the bottom. Each of us would soon feel that primal urge to mark out our place in the new pecking order in that social battlefield that is the school playground.



I was an underdeveloped, quiet, scrawny twelve-year-old. In a social structure that rewarded prowess on the football field above academic achievement, I was the lowest of the low. Wise enough to befriend larger, more athletic types, I was however, vulnerable and exposed whenever the tough boys came looking for ways to assert their dominance. I needed an effective way to leap up that pecking order. I needed a plan.

I decided I had to fight someone. I admit to being slightly put off by the fact that I had only ever fought with my sisters before – and that was usually just verbal fisticuffs. I had never actually punched anyone (or anything, for that matter) before. I had, however, watched many TV shows where the hero inevitably slugs it out with a Saloon full of villains, emerging triumphant through the swinging doors with, at worst, a slight trickle of blood emanating from the corner of his mouth. I started observing these shows with greater interest. I would observe the nuances of pugilistic prowess – the left uppercut, the right jab, the frequently-effective "one-two". I would stand in front of the bathroom mirror practicing my aggressive stances, imagining bulging muscles where all that the mirror revealed were lumps which to the untrained eye would be considered indistinguishable from a mild insect bite. In moments of rational coolness I would observe that these stances looked decidedly less aggressive if the steam was wiped from the mirror, but nevertheless, my mind was set. I was to become invincible, and revered from one corner of the Playground to the other. I was to literally become a legend in my own lunchtime.

A more substantial obstacle to these ignoble ambitions was the fact that I actually didn't dislike anyone with enough fervour to justify picking a fight with them. And besides, I was realistic enough to know that I would only stand a chance of winning against a foe who shared similar anatomical attributes with myself, namely skinny, un-athletic, preferably short-sighted and, hopefully, as scared as I was. But who?

I looked purposefully around the classroom. Peter Smith? No – he’s small, but he’s my best friend, and as strong as an ox. Tim Wilson? No – he’s a front-row forward. For the A Team, no less. Tony Bramble? It would be very easy to pick a fight with him. He’s always in trouble. But being so makes him too experienced, so no. What about John “Four-Eyes” Fogarty? He’s the smallest kid in class. He’s a loner, so not much risk of someone tougher coming to his defence. He appears to read books constantly, so he won’t attract too much sympathy from the other boys. And his family is poor, so I guess he hasn’t even had my advantage of learning how to fight from TV. Perfect!



So, Four-Eyes Fogarty it is. Now all I need is to invent a reason for a fight. Surprisingly, I discover that this is not difficult for a twelve-year-old boy. All it requires is a bit of pushing and name-calling over some trivial incident and you have a fight on your hands. My plan is now set. I shadowbox that night, confidence growing. Mine will be the name on everyone’s lips by this time tomorrow.

Lunchtime arrives too soon as I feel my late-night bravado rapidly waning in the cold light of day. However, I need to go through with it. My whole future depends on this day! I wait for some small excuse to pick the fight of the century. I don’t have to wait long – you see, Four-Eyes Fogarty spends much of his lunchtime walking around the playground, his nose immersed in a book. This makes him a sitting duck for taunts. He has, however, developed a degree of immunity to taunting, so I have to use something more substantial. The tennis ball with which we are playing handball proves to be the perfect first-strike weapon. I wait my chance, then direct it at the unsuspecting Four-Eyes just as he walks past. I let rip with emotions I didn’t even know I had. I accuse him of being deliberately obstructive, causing me to lose that vital winning point. I refuse to accept his spluttering apology. I push him (just like in the movies!). I call him names. I knock his book to the ground.

For the briefest of moments I hesitate. Suddenly I see myself in poor Four-Eyes’ shoes and I feel sorry for him, but it’s too late now. I’ve come too far. The crowd is gathering and I must go through with it. In a few minutes, after I punch his lights out, I’ll be king of the castle and I won’t ever have to be socially catalogued with the likes of Four-Eyes Fogarty again!

As he stoops to pick up his book, I decide that this is an ideal time for that well-practiced, fabulous right uppercut to the jaw. Whoosh! You could actually hear the bones break, just like Clint Eastwood punching out the bad guy. Four-Eyes stood bolt upright at the shock, his black-rimmed glasses askew. My right fist recoiled in sheer pain. The bones I heard breaking were not in his jaw. They were in my hand. The fight was over. My friend Pete wrapped my throbbing arm in my shirt and marched me off to the infirmary. This was not the triumphant march I had in mind.



As we ascended the stairs I glanced behind, to see my recently-contrived adversary surrounded by enthusiastic admirers who previously had never even acknowledged his existence, heartily congratulating him on his stunning victory. They were even calling him John, for heaven's sake!

The Principal phoned my mother, who came and took me to hospital.

To pee or not to pee (1964)

My infant illnesses may have come and gone, but I continued to wet the bed like a baby almost every night, until the age of thirteen. Embarrassing though this was for me, it was distressing for my parents. It was particularly difficult for my Mum, who had to wash the sheets every day, carefully avoiding any hint of blame, which might endanger my already delicate psyche (or so she must have thought).

I still remember the welcoming comfort of that warm liquid enveloping my half-asleep body, followed by the sudden horror and shame as I realised what just happened. I recall my feeble attempts at hiding the evidence in the washing basket, and trying to make up my bed in the pre-dawn darkness so no one would know. I recall with dread the holiday camp where I was too embarrassed to admit to a “bed-wetting problem” and so I tried to stay awake for a week. I didn’t even remain dry through the first night, much to the cruel amusement of my bunkmates.

My parents tried everything they could think of. I was taken to Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Social Workers and Doctors. I was given dolls to play with, representing members of my family. My behaviour was observed through one-way mirrors. I was required to sleep on rubber sheets. I was even electrically hooked up to a machine that would howl like a banshee at the first hint of urine, a contraption which only served to wake the entire household who would then gather around my bed to watch me, still sound asleep, wallow in a gathering pool of steaming fluid.

When I turned 13, my worried mother began to wonder what to tell prospective girlfriends... none of us could see any end in sight. And then my Dad decided to take me on a very rare father-son “bonding” trip to Fiji. After the first night in our hotel in Suva, the cleaner, Tunka, flung my saturated sheet over his huge outstretched arm, pointed to the incriminating yellow circle of dampness and uttered those now-prophetic words “Fiji Doctor, he fix!”

While I cringed with embarrassment, my ever-adventurous Dad negotiated the price (two packets of cigarettes) and we set off after breakfast, following the burly Tunka into the jungle behind Suva. An hour or so later, we came upon a small village of thatched huts surrounding a large corrugated iron hangar. We paused at the hangar’s door while Tunka exchanged greetings and told the “doorman” the purpose of our visit. I can only assume that this is what they were saying, as it was all in Fijian. However, the meaningful glance at me, then the loud guffaw as he slapped me on the back told me that the “doorman” was in no doubt about the “bed-wetting problem” we were here to have fixed.



Dad was told to hand me the cigarettes and to wait outside. The doorman opened the thick wooden door and motioned Tunka and me inside. With Tunka's leathery hand reassuringly grasping my shoulder I stepped into the dark, smoke-filled room. As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I could make out a semi-circle of dark-skinned men sitting cross-legged on the hard-packed dirt floor. Streaks of light from the numerous holes in the sheet-iron roof penetrated the dust and smoke to reveal the focus of their attention... a large Kava bowl. At the other end of the room, beyond the bowl, was an altar, complete with white cloth, crucifix and chalice. A tattered poster of Christ hung above the altar, alongside a number of skulls, several grotesque, crudely crafted dolls, an American flag and bits and pieces of anatomy from a variety of unidentifiable Fijian fauna.

Sitting in the room's only chair, between the bowl and the altar, was a huge man dressed in army fatigues and a well-worn sports jacket, with a garland of bark, leaves and flowers around his shoulders. I quickly surmised that he must be the "Fiji Doctor". No sooner had my eyes adjusted to this strange scene than Tunka pushed me into the semi-circle, towards the Doctor. The deep hum of conversation stopped, and all eyes now fixed on me. I stopped in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do. The Doctor's resonant voice now filled the room. Tunka gave a long reply, at the end of which the whole room burst into peals of laughter. There was much slapping of thighs and stomping of feet, which only served to add more dust to the thick cloud that was already there. Through the laughter and the dust haze I saw the Doctor beckoning me forward. I handed him the cigarettes, he handed me a well-worn cup and he motioned for me to sit in front of the Kava bowl. The laughter subsided.



The Doctor, with cigarettes now firmly stashed away in his sports jacket, began chanting and spraying water in my general direction. The semi-circle of men obviously knew what he was saying because when he had apparently finished, they chorused "Ah Bula!" and clapped their hands in unison. They then all looked expectantly at me. I held out my cup and the Doctor filled it with Kava ceremoniously ladled from the large bowl. I drank it all. It tasted like mud. My mouth went instantly numb, the surprised look on my face causing further amusement. Another "Ah Bula!" and everyone drank as if on my signal. The Doctor stepped down from his chair, grasped me firmly on the shoulder with his left hand, thrusting at me a box of Aspros and a brown bottle containing a mysterious, cloudy grey liquid. He then recited what I can only assume to be instructions and turned me around. I strode as confidently as I could towards the door, as the men returned to their Kava and conversation. Dad was waiting outside, curious about what had just happened. I couldn't stop talking about it as we wound our way back to Suva.

We later agreed that it might be unwise to take the Aspros and the mysterious drink – even if we had understood the instructions. However, Aspros or no Aspros; drink or no drink, I haven't wet the bed since. Not once. Truly.

An electrifying experience (1964)



A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Never has the truth of this well-worn adage been so clearly demonstrated than when I attempted to test my awakening appreciation of the awesome power of mains electricity. Perhaps an advisory saying more applicable to this particular story would be along the lines of *when it becomes apparent that one's ambition vastly exceeds one's knowledge, DON'T DO IT.* I wish I were more aware of this advice back then...

It was the winter of '64. Armed with knowledge gleaned from Brother Watson's infamous school physics experiments, performed with 12-volt batteries, wires, light globes and switches, supplemented with selected readings from my growing collection of Popular Mechanics magazines, I decided to embark on a project of my own. I would build an electric radiator, just like Dad's rusty old single-bar antique that graced our lounge room floor each winter. Only much better!

Brother Watson's physics lessons had taught me how electricity consists of a stream of electrons forced along a wire. They also taught me that if the wire is thin enough, the struggle to urge those electrons through the narrow wire generates heat. This was the simple principle I was going to employ to heat my winter-chilled bedroom. Suspecting (quite rightly, as it turned out) that such a project might not meet with parental approval, I set about assembling the required equipment in secret.

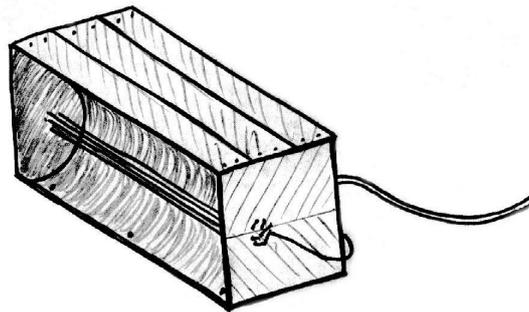
Of course, I reasoned, to heat a space as large as my bedroom would require much more energy than could be supplied by some feeble 12-volt battery. My electric radiator would need to be plugged into the mains supply... all 240 volts of it. To achieve this necessary extraction of energy from my bedroom's power point, I borrowed the spare extension cord from downstairs and removed the fitting at the socket end. This process exposed three bared wires. My plan only required two, so I taped the now redundant green Earth wire back on itself, then stripped away enough insulation to allow the remaining two wires to be separated by 30 centimetres or so.

By passing electricity through steel wool, Brother Watson had spectacularly demonstrated that I just couldn't use any old wire to create the necessary electronic resistance. I knew that Tungsten wire was strong enough to withstand the white heat generated within a light bulb, so that's what I decided to use. Fortunately, our local hardware store sold it, so I bought about two metres of the shiny thin metal and secreted it temporarily under my bed.

A diligent bit of tin-snip surgery on one of Mum's discarded large Pineapple Juice tins yielded a passable curved reflector, made even more reflective through the judicious layering of some of Mum's aluminium foil on its inner surface.

To provide sufficient support for the whole contraption I needed a container of some sort. Oakey's nearby General Store was able to provide just the thing, in the form of a wooden fruit box, into which I was able to securely nail the reflective crescent of modified Pineapple Tin.

Ideally, I would have preferred to coil the Tungsten wire around an inert insulating rod, much like a real radiator, but I couldn't actually find anything remotely suitable, so I decided to weave the wire back and forth between the ends of the fruit box, being careful not to entangle them. This required the drilling of several delicately placed holes in each end, guiding the Tungsten strands as close as possible to the crucial focal point of the reflector, without having them touch one another or the foil-clad Pineapple Tin.



With the delicately organised complex zig-zag of Tungsten now in place, all that remained was to connect each of its ends to the bared wires of the extension cord and all was ready. I would soon be basking in the warm glow of my own electric radiator...

It was just after dinner that night when everything was at last ready. I cleared a space on the floor around the radiator – just in case. I closed my door to prevent any unwelcome parental intervention. I made one final check of the wiring, aimed the business end of the radiator towards where I would soon be sitting comfortably and warm, plugged the extension cord into the wall socket and flicked the switch.

A crucial fact that Brother Watson had obviously failed to emphasise in his physics class was that current-carrying Tungsten will only glow happily when it is in a vacuum. In the oxygen-rich atmosphere of my bedroom, however, super-heated Tungsten actually burns so rapidly it explodes. In fact, multiple strands of Tungsten wire, arranged at the focal point of a highly reflective curved surface, will explode with enormous force.

Enough force, it turns out, to send the unfortunate, and highly flammable, fruit box flying across the room, trailing sparks and fumes, crashing spectacularly into the wardrobe door. The almighty boom of the exploding Tungsten and the consequent crash of the fruit box thudding into the wardrobe were joined a split second later by a muffled bang outside as the house's main fuse disintegrated, instantly throwing the whole house into darkness... a darkness penetrated only by the feeble glow of a smouldering fruit box, leaning ungraciously up against my wardrobe door.



I sat stunned on my bed, awaiting the inevitable maternal inquisition, rehearsing a range of excuses and cute, quizzical looks. However, as an anxious, worried mother burst breathless into my smoke-filled room, and her gaze settled accusingly on the glowing wreckage, with its telltale lead plugged into a singed and smoking power point, I realised that any pleading of innocence would clearly fall on deaf ears. So I confessed fully, hoping that her admiration of my inventiveness might somehow outweigh her anger at my obvious stupidity. No such luck.

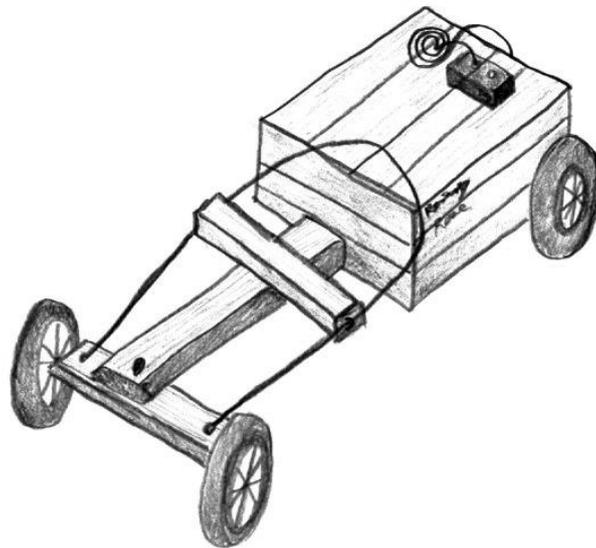
“Do you realise you could have been killed?” she spluttered, as if this wasn’t half obvious. “And you could have taken us all with you!” she added, waving her arm in the general direction of the darkened doorway, where a small crowd of energetic siblings had gathered. I had no answer to her justifiable accusations, but instead apologised profusely and busied myself unplugging the offending extension cord, gathering the smoking ruins of my once proud radiator and casting them unceremoniously out of the window. In the true spirit of grovelling apologies, I replaced the melted fuse and removed all traces of evidence “...before your father gets home”.

As a final irony, since my bedroom now reeked of an acrid mixture of ionised air, vaporised Tungsten and burnt wood, requiring me to keep the window open all night, I resigned myself to a very cold night’s sleep. A far cry from the imagined warmth that could have been...

Ramblin' Rose (1965)

I saw my father only rarely when I was a child. He worked such long hours, and was away so much that I longed for a father like they had on those American TV sit-coms... So when he suggested we build a billy-cart together I was ecstatic. Never mind that my father didn't know one end of a nail from the other – here was my father and I actually doing something together. How wonderful!

We scavenged the wheels from an old pram Mum had stored under the house. We salvaged a few fence palings from the corner of the yard where no one would miss them. We asked old Mr Oakey if we could retrieve a fruit box from the stockpile behind his shop. We even splurged and bought a half-pint of Deep Burgundy paint from the Harbord Hardware. We were fixing to build the best darned billycart ever.



In spite of my father's ineptness and my inexperience, we somehow managed to assemble the wheels and bolted them to the fence-paling frame. We even managed to design and produce a complex rope-assisted steering contrivance by routing the ropes through a series of pulleys so they emerged on either side of the driver – no casually dangled loops of rope on this little beauty!

The *piece-de-resistance*, however, was to be the fruit box. Not for us the “standard” design that required the driver to crouch within the confines of the fruit box. No, if I was to be King of the Road, then I would sit ON TOP of the box. So, thumbing our noses at time-honoured convention, and eschewing the established principles of aerodynamics, angular momentum and dynamic stability, we inverted the fruit box so the driver would be perched, in grandeur, high above the roadway. This magnificent contraption was then lovingly painted in Deep Burgundy, and christened with some ceremony *Ramblin' Rose*. This name was chosen in honour of the song Dad and I played in a little café on our way to a rare camping holiday on the South Coast, and was inscribed with an elegant flourish in brilliant white on both sides of the upturned box.

With the paint barely dry and the wheels newly greased, it was time to try it out. The first few test runs were on the short slope beside the house. Sure, the steering was a little awkward, with the ropes routed either side of my hips, but I could get used to that. The biggest problem appeared to be the lack of brakes. This was no hindrance while we remained in the confines of our yard, but may prove a bit of a nuisance once outside tearing down the local roads at breakneck speed. Dad and I were so

consumed by the look of *Ramblin' Rose* that we had neglected to design a few essentials, such as brakes.

Undaunted, I struck on a simple solution. Not for us the ugly mechanicals of a conventional hinged stick on the back wheel. Besides, we had used up all of the paint, so the stick would be embarrassingly unpainted – and it would have to be over a metre long to reach the dizzy heights of the driver. No, I had a much simpler, and more elegant solution. I would employ the same technique that boats use so effectively. I would use an anchor.

I reasoned that if a simple anchor can stop a huge ocean liner, then surely that is the way to stop a teeny-weeny billy-cart. Of course, I couldn't actually lay my hands on an anchor, so I improvised. I found a house brick that I was sure would do the trick... it already had three holes in it, just inviting a rope to be tied to it. So that's what I did. The rope was about 3 metres long, one end attached to the house brick, the other to the back axle of *Ramblin' Rose*. There was even plenty of room behind me on the upturned fruit box to place the brick atop its neatly coiled rope. Perfect!

So, confident that everything would work, I towed *Ramblin' Rose* to the steepest hill I could find... the legendary (and appropriately named) Gore Street. Exhausted, I stopped at the top, turned *Ramblin' Rose* around, checked the wheels and the steering pulleys, proudly took my place atop the fruit box and pushed off. Wheeee! We were flying! Of course it was hard to hang on and steer at the same time (we hadn't planned for the "hanging-on" requirement), and every little deviation from a straight line set up pendulum-like gyrations in the top-heavy contraption, but we were still picking up speed at an exhilarating rate.

Now, Gore Street may be steep and straight, but it terminates at a T-intersection with Kooloora Avenue. I wasn't too concerned with this fact, since I was sure my anchor would pull me up in an instant, and I would be able to step down triumphantly at the bottom of the hill, eager for another run.

Kooloora Avenue was rapidly looming ahead. Time to let the anchor go. Of course, this meant that I had to first let go of the steering rope on the right side. Never mind, I'll be stopped soon! The brick hit the ground with an unreassuring thud, bouncing high into the air. Constrained by its attached rope, it bounced wildly a mere 3 metres behind my head. Meanwhile, the billy-cart was executing its own version of a top-heavy death-roll, accentuated by the loss of right-rope steerage. I was now forced to relinquish the left-side rope as well, as all I could manage now was to hang on for dear life.

We careered across Kooloora Avenue, with me momentarily imagining how much worse this could have been had a car been coming which, fortunately, it wasn't. We crashed into the gutter on the other side of the road, to the awful sound of twisting metal and splintering wood. I tried to jump clear at the last moment, but became entangled in the convolutions of the flailing steering rope. As I slid to a painful halt against the fence, I briefly thought "Well, that wasn't so bad!" I had, however, forgotten about the maniacal house brick following close behind. It crashed into my right forearm, shattering the bone in two places.

Using my remaining good arm, I dragged the remnants of my once-beautiful *Ramblin' Rose* up the short distance to home. And then my mum took me to hospital.

A Mass debate? (1966)

As a “Marist Brothers boy” I was, along with my fellow classmates, subjected to the numerous religious rituals that seemed to permeate our young Catholic lives. One such ritual occurred every Friday morning, where the whole school was required to attend Mass in the local Church. Since every Catholic Mass included the offering of Holy Communion, many of us felt somewhat compelled to publicly display our otherwise questionable state of holiness by receiving said Communion. To ensure such a high level of sanctity amongst us, the local priests wisely preceded each Friday Mass with an hour or so devoted to hearing our confessions, where we were to reveal our darkest sins and receive forgiveness. Fortunately after a few “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers”, all stain would be duly erased from our blackened souls, making them worthy (albeit temporarily) of receiving Christ’s body in Holy Communion.



Although it was well understood that whatever was revealed in the confessional was between yourself and God - with the priest being merely a conduit for the exchange - it became apparent one Monday morning in mid-1966 that these Holy Fathers had actually divulged some of our more notable sins to the Brothers – our teachers! It appears that the priests had become increasingly alarmed at the growing level of masturbatory activity amongst “their” Year Ten boys. I can only surmise that they must have arrived at this conclusion after comparing notes – probably at some post-Confession debriefing where, we mischievously suspected, they willingly consumed the remainder of the Communion wine. So much for confessional secrecy! What’s more, they appeared to have revealed their earth-shattering conclusions to Brother Coman, our highly conservative Principal, no doubt with the noble intentions that he could do something about our disgusting habits before we all ended up blind or condemned, hairy handed, to the eternal fires of Hell.

Brother Coman was a gentle soul to whom this revelation of rampant sinfulness would no doubt have come as a significant shock. He obviously discussed the problem with the other Brothers and together they appear to have concocted a fiendishly clever plan aimed at discovering the extent of this particular sinful activity, which would then guide them in devising some cunning strategy for dealing with it. True to the long-held Catholic tradition of blind obedience to religious authority, he directed that the execution of this grand plan would be the responsibility of the younger, perennially red-faced Brother Nicholas.

Thus it was that the first hint of all this inter-order conniving arrived as we settled in to our usual Monday morning Latin class. It took the form of an instruction issued in hushed, nervous tones from a clearly embarrassed and agitated Brother Nicholas.

“Um, we are conducting a um, er, a survey of Year Ten boys. Each of you will be asked to leave the classroom one-by-one and go into the hallway. In the hallway you will find pinned to the wall a large sheet of paper containing a single, um, question and a grid into which you will place a tick at the appropriate place in answer to that question.”

At this point Brother Nicholas’s normally ruddy face was positively afire with embarrassment! What could this question possibly be? What will they do with this information? Why is it all so secret? Will any of us get into trouble?

The good Brother’s next instruction hardly served to clarify any of these questions...

“In order to conceal each boy’s, um, identity, both from us and from each of you, the grid has already been covered with a number of ticks, so your answers will remain anonymous. This survey is very, um, important.” And then, in a pleading tone, “We need you to take it seriously.”

At least he had our attention. Even Peter Bramble who usually slept through entire Latin lessons was now wide awake!



“Tony”, Brother Nicholas said, excitedly pointing at Tony Brown, “you will go first. When you return, the boy behind you will go, and so on. There is to be absolutely no talking. Go ahead, Tony.”

Brownie didn’t need to be asked twice. He leapt to his feet, keen to be first to discover the secret of the survey. He reappeared a minute or so later sporting a curiously quizzical expression, as if the mysterious grid of paper pinned so enticingly to the hallway wall was reluctant to reveal its true purpose.

Each boy took his turn. Some would return as red-faced as Brother Nicholas, avoiding eye contact wherever possible. Some would return with a smug look of satisfaction, as if they had just solved some immense puzzle. Some would return with faces mirroring Brownie’s confusion. What could it possibly be about? I could hardly wait for my go.

Eventually my turn came. I arose noisily from my wooden desk and made my way purposefully to the doorway, past columns of boys, some snickering, others looking at the floor, still others looking bewildered. The corridor was empty, save for a number of school blazers messily hanging from their pegs, and a large sheet of paper pinned to the far wall, the pencil still swinging on its string from its last use, marking little arcs on one corner of the paper. The paper had clearly been prepared with some care... the grids were drawn in blue ink with a confident hand, the pencilled-in ticks less so. Above the grid was a simple question, written boldly in red ink...

“How often, on average, do you masturbate?”

What on earth??? Having never heard the word “masturbate” before, I was as confused as ever. My stomach began to churn as a wave of panic swept over me. I was unfamiliar with the feeling of being unable to answer a question at school. What do I do now? Perhaps the headings over the grid would provide a clue...

“Once a day / More than once a day / Once a week / More than once a week / Once a month / More than once a month / Never”

Nope. No clue there. OK, gotta think. What would the Brothers be asking about so secretly? Could this be some sort of (very abbreviated) IQ test? Could it be a (somewhat limited) test of our vocabulary? Could it be some sort of secret Marist code that only those with a true religious vocation can answer? And then it came to me... perhaps masturbation is a word for a special type of prayer that I hadn't yet heard of. Of course, that's it. They want to know how often we pray. What else would the holy Brothers be interested in? I looked at the placement of the other ticks in the grid. There were hardly any in the “Never” column. Just as I expected – no self-respecting Catholic school boy would be willing to admit that he didn't ever pray!

As if to further validate my hastily devised hypothesis, I noted that the greatest number of ticks appeared to occupy the first and second columns, with the latter column being almost full – of course we all would say that we pray more than once a day! With the rising panic urging me on, my confidence in this interpretation grew, until I was utterly convinced of its truth. So I grasped the dangling pencil and made my mark, adding one more shaky tick to the second column. Without actually being familiar with the specific type of prayer referred to in the question, I DID pray more than once a day, so I wasn't really giving a “wrong” answer, was I? The Brothers will be so pleased with our piety! As I re-entered the room, however, and caught the mischievously knowing looks from some of the more mature of my classmates, my new-found confidence began to wane. I was still not totally convinced of the exact meaning of that word – a word so unfamiliar to me that I had forgotten it already.

As the Latin lesson wore on and more boys were exposed to the mysterious bold red question in the corridor, the snickering in the classroom grew, much to Brother Nicholas's obvious consternation. Surely they wouldn't be snickering so much if the question was really only about our prayer habits? I began to have more doubts about my interpretation. What if I got it wrong? It'll render their entire survey useless... and Brother Nicholas had said it was so important. I began to feel so stupid.

Further evidence of my stupidity came with the Playlunch break. Apparently Peter Piazza had looked up the word in a dictionary, and was happily revealing its real meaning to his disbelieving classmates. Who would have thought that it meant the same as wanking, jerking off, whacking the weasel, pulling off, playing with yourself, beating off, spanking the monkey, draining the lizard, yanking,

having a tug, flogging the log, or even (as we so delicately put it to the priests in the confessional) “touching oneself”? We knew dozens of words to describe an act that was so familiar to us all, but precious few of us (until now) had ever even heard the word “masturbation”, let alone know its meaning.

Oh my god! What will the Brothers think of us? Apparently most of us either interpreted the survey as I did, or added to the populous columns out of conformist ignorance - except for one boy who apparently placed a tick in every column, “just to be sure”, and another who confused the mysterious word with “masticate”, the meaning of which he knew so well that he confidently indicated his compliance by placing several ticks in the second column. Those poor Brothers must think we do little else than to jerk off continuously. (A supposition that probably wasn’t so far from the truth for a bunch of fifteen-year-old Catholic boys, but, of course, we didn’t want the Brothers, of all people, to be so blatantly aware this fact!).

Fortunately, it appears that the Brothers were as perplexed about what to do about their survey results as we were about the survey itself. From that day on, nothing was ever said about the survey, nor was the offending word that was the subject of the survey ever uttered by any Marist Brother in any classroom – the very omission that led to the confusion in the first place! Perhaps they just decided that the unholy problem of apparently incessant juvenile self-abuse was just too big to resolve. Perhaps they were just too busy praying for our lost souls. We can only imagine the conversation over dinner that night as Brother Nicholas nervously revealed the survey outcome!

At least we all learnt something in that Monday morning Latin class – even if it was only a new word... a word which, I can now state with unequivocal certainty, does not define a type of prayer!

The itch to hitch (1966)

Every Christmas Holidays, between 1964 and 1969, my best friend Midge and I would each grab a sleeping bag and a few dollars and hitchhike around the countryside. Our intentions were often no more complicated than to see where we'd end up. Looking back, it is nothing short of a miracle that we didn't end up in hospital, gaol, or worse. Our freeloading east coast pilgrimage in the summer of 1966 serves to demonstrate just how close to death we frequently came on these journeys – and how blissfully oblivious to the dangers we were...

December 1966. School was over. The freedom of the road beckoned. Our only plan was to see how far north we could hitchhike in a week. Midge's mum drove us, under fruitless protest, to Hornsby. (Midge knew, somewhat cruelly, that she would do anything he asked, under threat of him leaving her for his separated Dad). It was not long before we thumbed our first ride, a young man in a business suit, looking for company on his drive home to Newcastle. Many of the people who would pick us up shared the same motive - they just wanted the companionship. They were usually quite talkative and we soon discovered that if you showed the slightest interest in what they had to say, they would drive you almost anywhere! Our first Good Samaritan, for example, drove many miles out of his way to drop us on the Hexham Bridge, north of Newcastle. Our chances of getting a lift were far better there, he said.

Now patience is a necessary virtue for hitchhikers. You have no control over how long you need to wait until the next ride comes along. There is little point in planning ahead. Your fate is, literally, in the hands of others. Thus it was that day on Hexham Bridge. It was mid afternoon when the monotony of watching hundreds of cars pass us by was eventually ended with the welcome sight of brake lights a-glow on a rusty old Zephyr. Never mind that the Zephyr was slewing all over the road as it came to a shuddering halt. Never mind that the driver reeked of alcohol. Never mind that there were four people already in the car. It was a lift, and we were once more moving northwards!

Fortunately, being wedged in like sardines protected us from all but the most extreme steering corrections performed by our inebriated driver as we weaved our way up the highway. Midge and I quietly discussed the possibility of asking one of the others to drive, until we realised that they had already elected the most sober of them to drive. At least we didn't have to make too much of an effort to keep up a conversation!



On and on we lurched, into the slowly building darkness of that hot summer's night. Up ahead through the insect-splattered windscreen we could see the twinkling lights of Telegraph Point. Now, as any seasoned Pacific Highway traveller (as we were!) would know, Telegraph Point is the site of a

notorious series of dangerous bends, climbing up the other side after the river crossing. Unfortunately their notoriety hadn't penetrated the beer-soaked consciousness of our driver. Miraculously he managed to negotiate the first bend, compressing his passengers onto one side of the car's interior. On the second bend we weren't so lucky. With a squeal of tyres we skidded sideways onto the gravel verge, wiping out a guidepost on the way. En masse, the occupants were now flung to the opposite side of the cabin. This added lateral momentum to a car already on the limits of sideways stability. As we slowed, the front wheel caught in a small rut and the Zephyr ever so slowly, if not gracefully, rolled onto its bulbous side.

Some writers, telling this story, might be tempted to describe this event as "sobering". Let me assure you that it was not - at least not for our four fellow travellers. Their state of inebriation merely appeared to dull any pain and cause them to find amusement in the whole episode. I was able to scramble over the guffawing bodies and open the rear door which was now, of course, opening straight upwards into the star-studded sky. I scrambled out, followed rapidly by a slightly distressed Midge. The others soon followed once the smell of oozing petrol was strong enough to overwhelm the smell of beer. We stood there for a while, staring at the upturned Zephyr, wondering what to do next. Eventually, one of the four leapt into surprising action. He retrieved the keys from the ignition, went around to the rear of the car and opened the boot. "Great", I thought. "He's finally realised the seriousness of the situation and is getting some emergency equipment". I should have known better. He emerged from the Zephyr's voluminous upturned boot, not with a car-jack or towrope, but with half a dozen bottles of beer.

Midge and I soon convinced them that it was not really desirable to leave the Zephyr on its side, dripping petrol, on the apex of a blind corner, and that we should at least try to right it and move it out of the way. So, reluctantly setting their beers aside they joined us in rolling the unfortunate vehicle back onto its wheels. Fortunately, the rounded shape of a Zephyr made this a relatively easy task - and I got the distinct impression that this was not the first time our fellow travellers had executed this particular manoeuvre. A quick inspection revealed that the only injury sustained by the car was a broken headlight and a few more scratches added to those already decorating the side panels, so, after retrieving the precious beers, we all piled back into the car and drove off into the now slightly dimmer night.

Maybe it was the single functioning headlight. Maybe it was the erratic way the car weaved into town. Maybe it was the layer of dirt covering the left side doors. Maybe it was the sight of six people and their luggage wedged uncomfortably inside. Maybe it was the fact that no one had closed the boot lid. Maybe it was all of the above. Whatever it was, we unsurprisingly caught the attention of the local Police as we clattered into Kempsey. Pulled over to the side of the road, we were quickly required to unfurl ourselves from the Zephyr's chaotic confines. While the Police were busy deciding which of several books they could throw at the driver, Midge and I took the opportunity to slink away down the main street of Kempsey, leaving an increasingly voluble argument brewing behind.

We grabbed a couple of hamburgers in town (our usual hitchhiking fare), then walked to Kempsey's northern outskirts, looking for a park where we could kip for the night. All we could find in the darkness was the town cemetery, but we were so tired that we just curled up beside the gravestones and fell instantly asleep. I don't think either of us realised the irony of our choice of sleeping location, given what had just happened at Telegraph Point.

Up with the sunrise, all that was needed was to roll up the sleeping bags and seek a ride further north. Two relatively unremarkable lifts got us to the outskirts of Grafton by that afternoon. We wanted to make it to the Queensland border by nightfall, but after an hour and a half with no success, we

decided to try a more direct approach. We ventured into a nearby truck stop and brazenly went from table to table asking if anyone was heading up the highway and wanted some company. The plan worked. A balding, middle-aged man looked us up and down and readily agreed to take us to Ballina.

Excited by the prospect of riding in a Big Rig, we were disappointed when we discovered that he drove a small delivery van. What's more, all three of us had to squash uncomfortably into the front seat. Oh well, beggars can't be choosers.

All seemed pretty normal for the first hour or so, with him regaling us with his tedious, uninformed opinions about immigration and politics, and us feigning interest as our usual "payment" for the ride. Then he began to go quiet, driving more slowly and taking a deepening interest in the country around us. We didn't think too much about this, until he suddenly turned off onto a dirt track, heading into the scrub. He kept reassuring us that this was a shortcut, but we were becoming increasingly suspicious. I nudged Midge who subtly prepared our only weapon, a concealed, sheathed knife strapped to his leg, just in case.

A few hundred metres along the track and our balding friend stopped the van. He ceremoniously reached across in front of us and opened the glove box. Inside, amongst the discarded tissues, old rego papers and yellowed postcards stood a large, half empty jar of Brylcreem. He spent the next few minutes explaining to us how he had tried them all, and in his opinion this was by far the best lubricant. As relatively naïve teenagers, we were no doubt unaware of the full scope of the sexual predilections of middle-aged men, but even to us this particular middle-aged man's intentions were blindingly clear. However, we were still willing to listen to his ravings, so long as he drove us to Ballina. It was when he started rubbing my knee, however, that we finally realised that driving us to Ballina was clearly not the highest item on his agenda. It was then that I gave Midge the signal. Midge slowly but obviously unsheathed the knife.



The knee-rubbing instantly stopped. He closed the glove box, restarted the engine and drove us, in silence, to the outskirts of Ballina. I have never been able to look at a jar of Brylcreem in the same way ever since.

Fumbling around in the dark (we didn't own torches) we found a relatively cleared area of land beside the highway, rolled out our sleeping bags and nervously laughed ourselves to sleep, fantasising on what might have happened if it were not for the knife.

The next morning I was woken not by the gentle kiss of sunbeams on my slumber-closed eyelids, but by the slobbering, warm, wet tongue of a Friesian cow on my forehead. We had chosen a cow

paddock as our hotel room, and this cow had chosen me as its breakfast. At least now my face was washed.

Back on the road, we were determined to be well into Queensland by that night. Our wish was answered when, in a screech of brakes and a roar of exhaust, a bright red Mustang convertible pulled over, its driver beckoning us inside. His name was Hans. He was a Swiss racing car driver, so he informed us, in Australia for the annual Drag Races being held in Surfers Paradise. He was obviously running late, or else he was convinced that the races were actually being held on the Pacific Highway, because he drove like a man possessed, one hand on the horn, the other on the steering wheel, nonchalantly weaving in and out of the lines of traffic, at twice their speed.

At one stage he gestured proudly at the speedometer. We were travelling at well over 100 miles per hour (160 kph). Midge was hanging on for all he was worth in the back seat, screaming his lungs out. I was happily ensconced in the front seat, listening to the radio, and since the top was down, I couldn't hear what Midge was yelling. I could only assume that he was screaming for joy.

That was the fastest I have ever travelled in a car, open-topped or otherwise. We zoomed past the Queensland border without us even noticing it. We spent more time on the wrong side of the road than on the legal side. We passed most cars as if they were stationary. Occasionally other cars, their wide tyres, twin exhausts and bonnet scoops suggesting that they too were heading for the races, would challenge us. Hans would laugh maniacally as he invariably left them in his wake. We should have been scared, but we weren't. Hans was so reassuringly calm and so obviously in control that we felt surprisingly safe, even when plummeting headlong around a blind corner on the wrong side of the double-yellow lines, horn blaring and Midge screaming.

What a ride! Hans dropped us in Surfers Paradise while it was still morning. Time enough for us to have a quick look around before heading north once more after lunch.

A few more rides and a day or so later found us south of Bundaberg. We had just been picked up by an old lady in a battered old straw hat, driving an even more battered old Holden ute. We were sharing our usual friendly conversation as we drove sedately down the highway. She told us how she lived on a remote farm and only seldom ventured into town. Nearing the first big intersection, the traffic lights turned amber. Our gentle little old lady alarmingly showed no signs of stopping. The lights turned red. Not only did she not stop, she accelerated – straight through the intersection, cars swerving and screeching on either side of us. Noticing me crouching in fear on the floor of the ute, she confessed how she always gets confused about the respective functions of Red and Green traffic lights. We set her straight, as best we could with quavering voices, then asked to be dropped off as soon as possible – “preferably before the next intersection, thank-you”.

Later that day, as we stood in the stifling heat beside the highway hoping, as usual, for a lift, preferably in an air-conditioned car, we noticed that the swarms of flies were paying us more attention than usual. It didn't take us long to conclude that this might have something to do with the fact that our unwashed bodies had been wearing the same unwashed clothes for nearly a week. Since we only had the one set of clothes each, washing them would normally present a bit of a problem. Our solution? We walked through the heat, dust and flies to a nearby creek – and just kept right on walking into that cool, wonderful water, much to the amusement of the picnicking family on the shore. We were soon dry thanks to the obliging Queensland sun. Problem solved.

We had been on the road for 6 days. We had made it to Rockhampton and we were still alive. Not bad going, we decided. However, for those 6 days (and nights) with increasingly annoying intensity,

Midge had been pining sickeningly for Narelle, his latest love. The problem was, Narelle was at a Christian camp at Wairo Beach, some 200 kilometres south of Sydney. We were now more than 2,000 kilometres north of Sydney. Undeterred by this minor inconvenience of geography, Midge exclaimed, "Let's go and see Narelle". "OK", I compliantly responded. It was as simple as that.

We crossed the highway and began bending our thumbs southwards. Within 10 minutes, as if in answer to Midge's prayers, a huge truck pulled up, air brakes complaining loudly. "Where ya headed?" the driver quizzed after we'd caught up to where he'd stopped. "Sydney" we panted. "So am I, hop on up". We climbed in, after tossing our bags beneath the tarpaulin covering the gigantic trailer. We were in luck. Eddie revealed that he intended to drive non-stop to Sydney, so we should be there in two days. Two days! Midge was ecstatic – only 48 hours away from his beloved Narelle. I was amazed at how Eddie intended to drive 2,000 kilometres non-stop. I soon discovered how he proposed to do it. One look in his eyes betrayed the cocktail of chemicals that were conspiring to keep him awake. Soon, those same chemicals would nearly kill all of us.



All that first day Eddie drove, with Midge and I taking turns in sitting atop the engine cover and engaging Eddie in conversation, for that was really why he had picked us up - we were a human supplement for his anti-sleep drugs. Throughout the night we continued relentlessly south. Midge and I would sleep fitfully, but at least we could sleep. Eddie wouldn't allow himself that luxury. He would prattle on endlessly, one minute cursing the system that was forcing him into this way of life, the next minute extolling, somewhat unconvincingly, the immense joys of truck driving. He would talk in unintelligible code to his "buddies" in other trucks via his CB. They would warn one another of the presence of "coppers", these being the only times Eddie would slow down. We stopped only occasionally for food, fuel and toilet breaks. Our ears were ringing with the ceaseless engine noise. Our bums were numb from sitting atop the reverberating engine cover. Midge and I were dead tired. But Eddie was a man possessed, operating like a remote controlled automaton. By morning, Eddie had dramatically increased the frequency of his pill popping.

We should have seen it coming. We should have left him at that last truck stop. Or we should have been more insistent that he get some sleep. But we didn't. The lure of two days to Sydney was just

too great. It all caught up with Eddie just before Cessnock. It was early evening. Unable to stay awake any more, Midge and I had both nodded off, leaving Eddie with only his pills and the crackling CB for company. The next thing we knew we were awoken by the frantic blare of a car horn, accompanied by an almighty squeal of tyres and the acrid smell of burning rubber. We awoke just in time to perceive the blur of headlights screeching past our bull bar. We were on the wrong side of the road. Eddie was sitting bolt upright, staring unblinkingly ahead, his sinewy arms wrestling with the steering wheel. Fortunately for us all he saw the car coming in the nick of time. Summoning every possible ounce of consciousness, and with all 16 wheels locked, he was miraculously able to swerve the truck to avert disaster by the barest of margins. After what seemed like an eternity, we came to a halt on the left-hand verge, two parallel trails of rubber following us for 50 metres, across two lanes of highway. The car that had just avoided becoming a Mack Truck hood ornament kept on going north, with its shaken occupants no doubt counting their blessings. Without uttering a word, Eddie collapsed onto the steering wheel then and there and fell sound asleep.

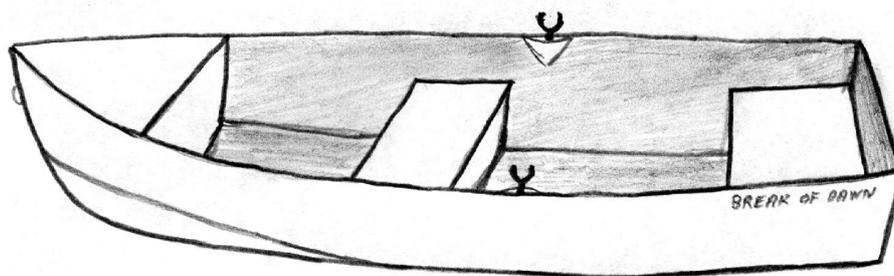
We placed a pillow under Eddie's head and also slept, once our adrenalin levels had reduced to near normal. The three of us slept until 5 o'clock the next morning, much to Eddie's obvious disgust – he was now behind schedule! By lunchtime we had arrived at Parramatta. We had to wait for the wheat to be unloaded before we could retrieve our bags – it was a bulk wheat truck, and after 2,000 kilometres of constant agitation, our bags had settled to the bottom of the wheat in the trailer. By lunchtime we had farewelled a nervously twitching Eddie and were heading south to Midge's Narelle, a mere 200 kilometres away. Eddie hadn't said a word about what had happened at Cessnock, leading Midge and I to wonder if such near misses were a standard fact of life for drugged-to-the-eyeballs truck drivers. We certainly hoped for the sake of other road users – and fellow hitchhikers - that they weren't.



Brake of Dawn (1967)

Back in 1967 I was the very proud owner of a 4.5 metre solid-decked catamaran, called *Dawn*. By today's standards she was heavy, wet and slow, but I just loved her to bits. Being too young to drive, we had to moor *Dawn* in North Harbour. We saved up and bought a mooring (actually an old car engine with a chain attached) and had it laid about 100 metres from the North Harbour boatshed. As often as we could, my best friend Midge and I would cycle from Harbord to North Harbour for a sail. Neither of us was game enough to tell our parents that to get between the shore and *Dawn* we took turns in swimming through the shark-infested waters. Once while returning to the mooring after yet another beautiful day of sailing, we glided over a school of sharks, each with that unmistakable Hammerhead shape. Neither of us wanted to swim to shore that day, and as we sat on *Dawn*'s deck watching the sun set behind Balgowlah's hills, we agreed to buy a dinghy. Since we were both broke, this was to be a tall order.

Salvation came in the form of a 2.5 metre dinghy on a rusty old hand-drawn trailer, abandoned on a spare block of land not 200 metres from my home at Harbord. A knock on the door of the house next door found an old gent who appeared to be more than happy for us to take it away. He had planned to dump it, but didn't know how to get it to the Tip. Midge and I could hardly believe our luck!



We cleared away the entangling weeds from the ancient motorcycle wheels that supported the trailer. Then we tried to move it. It was then that we came to realise why the old man was so pleased to be rid of it. It literally weighed half a ton! Built of quarter inch steel plate, with two large enclosed buoyancy tanks – one in the bow, one in the stern – this was no ordinary dinghy, it was a miniature battleship. However, we quickly recruited friends, family and a couple of unsuspecting passers-by, and together we manhandled the trailer and dinghy up to my Dad's garage. Here we stripped her back to bare metal, primed and painted her white (in a vain attempt to disguise the battleship resemblance). We also fixed and painted the trailer as best we could – we found that merely pumping up the tyres was the greatest help, though.

Within two weeks, the gleaming white, newly christened *Brake of Dawn* (get it?) was ready to launch. Now we were faced with a quandary – how to get her the 10 kilometres from Harbord to North Harbour. We toyed with the idea of rowing her out to sea from Freshwater beach, around North Head but, even though we were sure she was seaworthy enough, we were similarly sure our parents would freak out at that thought. So we decided to secure the hand-trailer to the rears of our two pushbikes and ride to North Harbour with the dinghy in tow. Easy!

Early next Saturday morning Midge and I set off on our epic journey. Side by side we rode, with *Brake of Dawn* following obediently behind. Flat, level stretches of road surprisingly presented no difficulties. However, we found that we had to dismount and push the whole thing up even the slightest incline. The relatively short downhills were a pleasure... we would revel in the gathering

speed, without the need to pedal or push. Neither of us gave much thought to stopping on these hilly sections, and fortunately we had no cause to stop for most of the journey. Until we came to Fairlight Hill, that is...

We had planned the route very carefully, bypassing as best we could the steepest hills, but there was no avoiding Fairlight Hill. This steep road was as straight as an arrow, passing through three intersections before terminating in a small car park, just above Treharne's Boatshed on the tree lined shore of North Harbour. It was late afternoon when we arrived exhausted at the top of this final hill. We knew that what we were about to do was foolish, but we were just too weary to care. Enticingly, ahead of us lay our final destination. We had come this far without incident, and we were not about to let logic and caution get in the way of us achieving our goal. So, with little more thought, Midge and I mounted our bikes and headed down that one last hill.

It was Midge who first recognised the folly of this final descent. He abandoned his bike soon after he realised that the four little stumps of rubber that formed the business end of his bike's braking system were to prove no match for a determined *Brake of Dawn* following close behind. I saw Midge bail out, barely 20 metres from the top of the hill, leaving his bike flailing dangerously beside mine. I was briefly tempted to follow his example, but the possible consequences of half a ton of rampant steel dinghy with nothing but gravity to steer it was too horrible to contemplate, so I just knew what I had to do. I had to ride this catastrophic contraption to the bitter end.

Within 100 metres, the remnants of the rubber pads that were my brakes gave up the fight, leaving metal callipers on metal rims, producing an ear-splitting squeal that could be heard for kilometres. I remember thinking that something that loud ought to be much more effective than it was in fact being. The brakes, or what was left of them, were now totally useless, apart from their new function of drowning out my screams. I was now at the mercy of gravity and God.

All that was left for me to do was to steer, although even this was proving difficult, as Midge's front wheel would occasionally make contact with the road, attempting to veer us off in random directions. Past the first intersection we sped, the banshee-like wail of the brake callipers attracting the attention of passing pedestrians. I could see a child tugging at his mother's dress and pointing in my direction, mouth agape. As if she needed assistance in noticing two pushbikes, one riderless, the other screaming like a hundred stuck pigs, being pursued by a mini white destroyer on rust-red motorcycle wheels!

Through the second intersection we sped. "We must be close to terminal velocity by now", I remember thinking, as if comfort could be found in such a thought. The white car park fence at the bottom of the hill was quite distinctive now. "Nearly there!" I reassured myself. I was by now in complete denial in relation to my predicament. The final intersection flashed past in a blur as I fleetingly pictured the awful outcome had that intersection been inconveniently occupied by a car. I remember worrying about the damage *Brake of Dawn* could have done. Fortunately I never had to find out.

As the fence loomed ever closer, I began to envisage the bow of *Brake of Dawn* breaking something much dearer to me than *Dawn* – my back. In a valiant attempt to avoid such a fate I attempted one final, heroic swerve. The trailer, loaded with its stubby white missile, now slewed sideways, overtaking me at considerable speed. Fortunately the dinghy hit the fence first, launching over the stone wall above the little beach beside the boatshed. The considerable momentum of the dinghy, with bikes and trailer still attached, took out several bushes and a small tree before expiring just a metre from the water's edge. Meanwhile, I had managed an unceremonious dismount and had

miraculously shot through the broken fence, landing in a screaming heap in the bushes beside the beach. Amid the cacophony of breaking branches I guess I missed the sound of my leg breaking, but I sure became painfully aware of it soon after.

A small, bemused crowd soon gathered. A quick-thinking Midge unhitched the bikes and tied the dinghy to a tree above the beach, thereby concealing the more incriminatingly direct evidence of our foolishness. The boatshed owner, realising my painful predicament, carried me inside where he phoned my mother. Mum arrived some 20 minutes later, not knowing whether to hug me mercilessly because I was still alive, or chastise me ruthlessly for being so careless. As mothers are apparently compelled to do in such circumstances, she did both. And then she took me to hospital.

POSTSCRIPT

I had to endure a painful two-hour wait in the Outpatients section of Manly Hospital. When a doctor eventually deigned to see me, he gasped in wonder at the sight before him, excitedly beckoning his fellow doctors to come over and have a look. To add even further insult to my injury, the focus of their attention was not my badly broken left leg, but the apparently rare form of congenitally displaced patella in the good knee lying alongside. My legs were so skinny, that even with one so badly swollen it merely looked normal.

Both the dinghy and Midge came through this ordeal with nary a scratch. The trailer was now more useless than it had ever been before... we gave it a ceremonious burial at sea - from the dinghy, of course. Both bikes needed new brakes and a bit of wheel straightening. I spent six weeks in plaster but, courtesy of a large plastic garbage bag, I was still able to sail. We unofficially renamed the dinghy *Break of Leg*. A year and a half after her eventful launching, a fierce Southerly storm washed her from her snug little North Harbour beach. By then we had come to realise that that little battleship was not only unbreakable, but was virtually unsinkable. In fact, even when full of water she floated just above the surface, courtesy of her hermetically sealed buoyancy tanks. As far as I know she is still floating somewhere out there in the wide blue Pacific Ocean, barnacle-encrusted but intact. To this day I quietly shudder whenever I hear of a yacht coming to grief upon hitting an "unidentified floating object". Could it possibly be...?

Losing my religion (1968)

A young man can sustain many different kinds of life-changing injuries as he stumbles along the uncertain, tortuous path towards adulthood. However, not all such pivotal events necessarily involve physical trauma. Sometimes they involve intellectual or even spiritual pain. This is one such story...

A good friend, Sue Clilverd, once described me as “religiously anti-religious”. And yet I was not always so. In early 1968 I was on the threshold of Catholic priesthood. By that year’s end I was an ardent atheist. This is the story of how, virtually overnight, I first lost my religious vocation, then my religion, and then God, becoming so fervently atheistic that no one who knew me then would have disputed the accuracy of Sue’s perceptive description. And I owe this radical transformation to the man whose very job it was to ordain me as a priest.

By the end of 1967 my religious beliefs had been unswervingly shaped by seventeen years of Catholic indoctrination. I had been born, baptised and confirmed into the Catholic Church. I had experienced my First Confession and my First Communion. My teachers had all been nuns or brothers. I devoutly observed Lent. I never ate meat on Fridays. I attended Church every Sunday and, in my later teens, nearly every day. For a time I even became an altar boy. I was so overwhelmed with the incredibly powerful and pervasive concept of the Christian God that I could never conceive of not “knowing Jesus”, feeling a genuine and deep sorrow for anyone who was unfortunate enough not to share the strength of my faith. I never for a moment doubted whether any of this heartfelt belief was untrue. Life then was so full of certainty – the certainty that comes from knowing that you are in sole possession of the Truth, and that, even if you didn’t know why certain things happened, God knew. And that was more than sufficient.



The undeniable superiority of this Catholic faith was clearly demonstrated to me in many ways during my formative years, yet none of these was more tangible than in the placement of the Catholics and the Publics (as we sneeringly referred to those who attended non-Catholic schools) on the school bus. It seemed perfectly natural to us when the conductor of our double-decker school bus insisted that the Catholics ride upstairs while the godless Publics were forced to ride on the lower level. To our warped young Catholic minds this was merely a precursor to an afterlife where all but us True Believers would be unhesitatingly condemned to Hell. Little did we know that this unfortunate seating arrangement was innocently conceived by the bus company merely to facilitate the off-loading of students at their respective schools, and had nothing to do with the superiority of one’s religion.

Forewarned, especially by the Brothers, I would encounter occasions when my beliefs would be tested. Logic and reason, reinforced with a little knowledge, would now and then cause me to question certain articles of faith. I remember, for example, the discomfort of first learning about Evolution. Was Noah's Flood real or was it just a story? Was the Earth really only 4,000 years old? Did God actually watch over every single creature or were they left to their own devices? Important though these questions now seem, back then their importance appeared not to matter to the True Believer. As long as you had faith, seemingly fundamental questions such as these would pale into inconsequentiality. The comfort of faith appeared to come not from providing answers, but from dismissing the questions.

By the time I was in Fifth Form I was so deeply immersed in the Catholic religion that Brother Ildephonsus convinced me that I might actually "have the Vocation". This was Catholic jargon used to define anyone who thought they might like to join the priesthood. This insight from a Brother whom I greatly respected was the only sign I needed. I decided then and there that I was going to be a priest.

The path to Catholic priesthood was very well defined, if not so well trod. There would be a series of interviews at which questions of increasing complexity and depth would be asked. Of course, as was always the case with Catholic doctrine, I would know the questions beforehand, and be well versed in the expected answers. I was one of three boys in their senior years at Marist Brothers who felt they had "the calling". We would stay in at lunchtime and after school to practice the procedure, quizzing each other incessantly and reciting the prepared answers by rote, until the questions had lost their import, and the answers became devoid of meaning.

The first interview was with Brother Coman, our school Principal. He was so taken with my zealous enthusiasm that I could have said anything and he would have given me the nod. I was on my way. I couldn't have been happier. At last I felt my life had real purpose. I was going to be a Catholic priest.

The second interview, held a couple of months later, was a little more challenging. It was with Father William, the ever-so-serious head of the Northern Sydney diocese. However, since his questions didn't stray from the accepted script and I duly recited my lines, I left the room confident in knowing that I was one step closer to my goal. The third interview would be arranged for early next year. I could hardly wait.



It was April, 1968 when my third and final interview was to take place. I was to be interviewed by none other than the aging Cardinal Gilroy, the head of the whole Catholic Church in Sydney. It was to take me six months to prepare for this one. One of the other two boys broke down in tears at one of our after-school sessions. His melodramatic loss of vocation merely served to strengthen the commitment of the two of us who remained. Ian McDonald and I were to do Brother Coman proud. We would overcome this final obstacle and triumphantly enter the Seminary next year – just wait and see.

The questions for this final interview were to plumb the depths of Catholic belief. They were to delve ever more deeply into Catholic doctrine. They were to examine whether we had the right stuff to be priests.

The fateful day finally arrived. The interview was to be held in the solitude of the presbytery study. Ian and I waited outside in the hall. We watched through the window as the Cardinal's gleaming black Rolls Royce swept into view. It glided into the school grounds, to be met by a flurry of Brothers and priests, each in turn kneeling to kiss the Cardinal's ring as he made his regal way towards the presbytery. He had made this journey just to see us. Ian started to pray as if he were trying to break the world speed-praying record. I nervously fingered the scapula which hung proudly about my neck. Neither of us could remain seated for any length of time. The wait was nerve-racking.

Cardinal Gilroy entered the study by another door, avoiding the two of us in the waiting room. After what seemed like an eternity a young priest summonsed me into the Study. He motioned for me to sit in a large leather chair, separated from the Cardinal by a huge expanse of highly polished teak desk. The priest left the room. I watched in silence as the Cardinal thumbed thoughtfully through several sheets of important looking papers. Eventually he looked up from this task, placed both hands behind his head and leaned back in his expansive leather armchair. "So you think you want to be a priest. Is that so my son?" "Y-Yes, your Eminence." I stuttered in reply, "And I'm certain that God also wants me to be a priest", I added.

Taken a bit by surprise by this *ad lib* addendum to his first question, the Cardinal shuffled through the papers once more until he found the page he was looking for... the prepared questions. From that point on, he asked the questions as scripted. I dutifully answered as scripted. Cardinal Gilroy appeared to grow increasingly pleased with each answer, delivered as expected. With each answer I was feeling more confident and more comfortable. All I had to do was to continue to mouth the answers as if it were Catechism learned by rote, and I was a shoe-in.

After an hour or so of this rehearsed inquisition we had reached the last question – something about the unity and separateness of the Holy Trinity. The pat answer was duly delivered and I was feeling relaxed in the knowledge that I had no doubt cleared the final hurdle to the Seminary. Then it happened - the fateful unrehearsed, unexpected extra question that was to shake the very foundations of my faith. Cardinal Gilroy placed the completed question sheet on the desk and leaned back contentedly in his chair. "Now tell me, my Son," he inquired. "Tell me if there is anything at all that worries you about the Catholic Church. Anything at all."

I was unprepared for this question. It was not on the list. Surprisingly, it took no time at all for me to find an answer. "Well, Your Eminence, I am a little concerned about one thing."

"What is it, my son? Speak up!"

“Well, Your Eminence, how can you explain the wealth of the Catholic Church? I mean, here you are in your chauffeured Rolls Royce, with a huge, expensive ring on your finger. And there is the Vatican, housing untold volumes of the World’s most valuable art works. Yet Christ clearly said that such wealth is meaningless. He told us to give all we have to the poor. He even said that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter Heaven. So how can the Church reconcile these conflicting views?”

Even as the question hesitantly left my lips I was certain that the good Cardinal could easily answer it. Such was the measure of the blindness of my faith... I had obviously just overlooked something that could have explained this quandary. I was confident that he would set me straight and point out the error in my reasoning. Not even in my wildest imaginings did I expect the answer he gave.

Cardinal Gilroy smiled gently and leant forward, resting his chin thoughtfully on one hand. “That is a very good question, my son. You see, the Church, myself included, must possess and display all of that wealth, otherwise we would not gain the respect of the people.”

I was stunned by this unexpected answer, but I didn’t wish to show it. I thanked the Cardinal for the interview and left the room, passing Ian still deep in nervous prayer. I emerged into the sunshine, confused and dazed by the Cardinal’s last statement. “Otherwise we would not gain the respect of the people!” What sort of a materialistic Church was I letting myself into? Did I really want to be part of an organisation that relies on the trappings of wealth to attract respect? Did it really have so little confidence in the relevance of its teachings that it had to use worldly riches to entice followers? How could a Christian organisation have so easily abandoned such a crucial cornerstone of its belief system – the incompatibility of wealth and faith? If this was indeed so, what, then, was left to distinguish the Church from, say, BHP or the Commonwealth Bank, or the Government?

I was to wrestle silently with these questions long into that night, and every night following. Was this religion in which I had so fervently believed for all those years merely a man-made construct after all? How could the Church so blatantly ignore the most basic and clearly stated tenets of its founder, Christ? From the instant Cardinal Gilroy gave that fateful answer I realised the immensity of the spiritual crisis I was facing. Seventeen years of Catholic indoctrination had taught me to seek answers in prayer. So I prayed. Even though I felt incredible guilt at even asking such questions, I prayed. Certain that God would guide me through this test of my faith, I prayed. I was confident that with fervent prayer and with God’s help I would pass this crucial test of my faith. But I didn’t.

Within a month or so of agonising searching and unanswered prayer I had forever abandoned any thoughts of becoming a priest. With this momentous revelation it was as if the floodgates of doubt had opened. My mind, now freed from the blind certainty of faith, was able to ask all of those questions that my belief had for seventeen years dismissed. It was as if I was able to step outside the confining prison walls of my religion and, for the first time in my life, objectively observe the life within that prison. I could see how the inmates (the Believers) were content with their lot only because, bound by the unquestioning acceptance of the rules, they knew no different. I felt as if my eyes were suddenly opened and I was seeing things for what they truly were, not for how I was expected to see them.

The flood of doubt continued. Within a few months I had abandoned all ties with the Catholic Church. I even wrote to the Pope, insisting that I be excommunicated, such was the passion of my conversion. Seventeen years living a lie! How dare they! I was reminded of the trauma I suffered as a child when told the truth about Santa Claus... only this was a zillion times worse. Not only had I

been deceived, but a quarter of the World's population has been similarly cheated from knowing the truth.

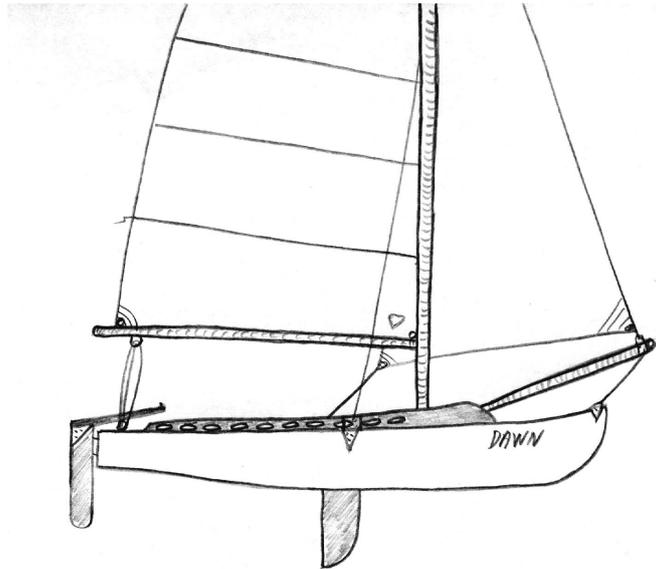
Within a year, stimulated by fellow university students who had lived outside the prison walls of religion longer than I, I had abandoned all religion and eventually, God. I had spent much of that year exploring several other faiths. I even accompanied zealous non-Catholic friends on Christian Beach Missions, where they fervently did their best to guide me down their own particular paths to knowing God. I devoured book after book on philosophy and religion, and engaged in numerous debates and discussions on everything from the constructs of social manipulation to the Meaning of Life. All of which did little but add further support to my inevitable conclusion – that all of this religious stuff was little more than man-made mumbo-jumbo, created as a way to simplistically describe the complexities of the Universe and keep the rebellious mobs under control. By the end of 1968 I had abandoned the whole concept of Heaven, Hell, Spirits, Souls... the whole big lie. I became a devout atheist, arguing willingly with anyone willing to hear my rationalist views (and a lot who weren't willing!).

My atheistic fervour burned for several years. I preached Atheism with the same zeal I no doubt would have had for Catholicism had Cardinal Gilroy not asked that final, fateful question. In a misguided fit of arrogant pride, I even thought of sending him a note, thanking him for the gift of intellectual freedom that he so unwittingly gave me, but I knew that would be unnecessarily cruel and that he would never understand.

Many years later, in the 1990's, I wrote an article for the *Australian Skeptic* magazine urging them to tackle the claims of major religions. My article and their "official" response, suggesting that they were on safer ground exposing spoon benders and UFO sightings rather than taking on the might of the established religions, triggered such an avalanche of letters – pro and con – that they "officially" asked me to stop being so provocative and to leave the topic alone. It is with some (albeit misplaced) pride that I now tell people that I was once even too sceptical for the Skeptics!

Many years later still, the raging fire of my religious resentment has cooled. I have reached a point of tolerance for all sorts of weird beliefs (and there are a lot of them!). I no longer vociferously challenge the spiritual beliefs of everyone I meet. I feel comfortable in my atheism but it is a comfort very different than that derived from the certainty of faith that Catholicism once gave me. In fact it could be described as a comfort derived from knowing that the truth is so complex and the human brain so feeble, that everyone who feels they know the truth is bound to be wrong – including me...

Hungry for adventure (1968)



To this day I don't understand why my parents let me do it. Perhaps they didn't really know where Hungry Beach was, particularly in relation to North Harbour. Perhaps I neglected to tell them exactly what we had in mind. Whatever the reason, on that sunny Friday morning in 1968, Pete Smith and I found ourselves aboard my 4.5 metre catamaran, *Dawn*, casting off from our North Harbour mooring with ocean-going adventure on our minds. Our plan was to sail through the Heads and turn left. We were then going to sail the 40 kilometres or so of open ocean to Pittwater, where we were to spend the next two nights camped ashore on Hungry Beach. On the following Sunday we were to retrace our steps, arriving safe and sound at North Harbour. At least, that was our plan.

The slowly building nor'easter on Friday required us to tack seawards once we had cleared the Heads. Consistent with our overconfident spirit of adventure, we just kept on going on port tack, until we were out of sight of land. In what was to become a nautical version of playing chicken, neither of us wanted to be the first to suggest we come about. Eventually, when there was nothing but ocean all around us, we both burst out into nervous laughter and agreed to tack. By mid-afternoon we were lucky enough to spy the Palm Beach lighthouse, guarding the entrance to Pittwater, dead ahead. We congratulated ourselves on our navigational skill, since we didn't have a compass, chart or even a watch between us. I look back now and shudder at the thought of such foolhardy disdain at the sea, but in those days we felt that we were invincible.



We sailed for some distance up the Hawkesbury River to Dangar Island, then returned as the sun was setting, to Hungry Beach, nestled beneath the towering sandstone cliffs of West Head. We dragged *Dawn* ashore and set up camp for the night. Since our entire belongings for this adventure fitted into a single Tupperware container, “borrowed” from Mum and lashed to the base of *Dawn*’s mast, you can imagine that our “camp” was no elaborate affair. In fact, it consisted of a fire in a pit dug in the sand, and *Dawn*’s mainsail draped over a couple of sticks. We didn’t miss the lack of cooking equipment, since we had nothing to cook, having eaten most of our meagre supplies during the day (damned hungry work that ocean voyaging!). Hungry Beach was to prove an appropriate name.

At least we were thankful that we had decided to include a couple of blankets. Not that it was too cold, but we discovered that they were essential to protect us from the swarms of mosquitoes and sandflies that were stirred into a feeding frenzy by our arrival. I don’t think they get many overnight warm-blooded visitors to Hungry Beach. Needless to say we didn’t get much sleep that night. But why should we care? We’re on an adventure - what do adventurers need of mere sleep?

During the night a Southerly Buster blew through, stirring up a sizeable swell. Sheltered as we were beneath West Head, we were quite oblivious to the Southerly change, however in the morning light we could see the waves breaking on the sand bar off Ocean Beach, on the opposite shore, beyond Lion Island. Maybe it was the delirium of hunger, the lack of sleep, or the effects of donating so much blood to the local insects, but we took one look at those waves and looked knowingly at each other. “Surf’s up!” we thought. There are so few moments in one’s life that clearly define the future directions of that life. This was one such moment. “Let’s see how well *Dawn* can surf that break!” I enthused. Pete was whooping too loudly at the prospect to give a discernable answer. Suffice to say it was a mutual, though fateful, decision.

We packed our few belongings into Mum’s Tupperware container, lashed it to the mast and shoved off. Beyond the shelter of West Head the Southerly was still blowing strongly enough to give us an exhilarating reach past Lion Island to the Ocean Beach bombora. I have since come to realise that waves always look substantially smaller and more benign when viewed from their seaward side. Back in 1968 this fact had not yet penetrated that compartment of my brain reserved for VITAL INFORMATION. Or perhaps it had, but the sense of caution that this would have engendered was overwhelmed by the sense of bravado and adventure. Whatever it was, we both chose to ignore the ominous warning signs.

Looking back, these warning signs included the crowd of people on the distant beach, just standing and looking seaward; the absence of anyone actually in the surf; and the huge swirls of sand kicked up whenever a wave broke over the bar, even though we had been told that the bar is over 4 metres deep.

We might have ignored the signs, but we did take the time to pause for a few minutes outside the break, visualising, if not actually planning, our impending spectacular feat of daring-do. We would sail over to the right, near Lobster Beach. There we would gybe and come at the waves on a screaming reach, being propelled even faster as we slid down the face of our deftly chosen wave, white water chasing behind us, merely to peter out on the other side of the bombora as we exit triumphant in a cloud of salty spray, only to come about and repeat the performance. Wow, this was going to be fantastic!

Sailing to Lobster Beach was not difficult. Gybing was easy. Seeing those huge waves side-on was surprisingly scary, but we were committed now. Ten, twelve, fifteen knots. We’re flying. A wall of

water loomed menacingly behind us. This is it! A tweak of the tiller and what was merely a vision a few minutes ago became reality. We were going faster than we had ever gone before. The wave was just about to break... but what's this? Shouldn't it have been breaking behind us? It broke with a thundering, sickening roar on top of us. Poor little *Dawn* shuddered beneath this watery onslaught. The wind pressure in her sails combined with the sheer weight of water on her deck to trip her over her leeward bow. Pete and I are catapulted into the angry, churning, gritty froth.

Aided by our life jackets, we both surfaced to see a bedraggled *Dawn* on her side surrounded by the swirling waters that are all that remains of our wave. A quick check revealed that at least her mast was still intact, and there appeared to be no visible damage, other than the loss of the Tupperware container. A scream and a frantic seaward gesture from Pete alerted me to the imminent onslaught of the next wave. We both clung to our valiant little craft, hoping that the wave might actually right her. It didn't. In the temporary lull before the next wave, Pete and I agreed that he should swim out to support the tip of the mast, to prevent *Dawn* from "turning turtle" and breaking her mast in the sand. My task was to use my weight (such as it is) on the righting rope on the lee side of the hulls in an attempt to lever her upright. Several more waves crashed over us as we manoeuvred into position. I would later learn that Pete broke two fingers trying to push the mast free from that bombora's watery grip.

At one stage I noticed a surfboat leave the beach. "They're coming to rescue us!" I yelled to Pete. I doubt he heard me above the constant boom of the waves. Whether or not Pete heard me is academic anyway. The boat was swamped by the enormous waves barely 50 metres from shore.

The excitement of the day before, the sleepless night, the lack of food and the horrendous struggle for survival in which I was engaged all came together in the next moment. I remember straining for all I was worth on the righting rope, battling the pain of numerous cuts and bruises, scrabbling for purchase on *Dawn*'s slippery underside, when a wave, more gigantic than the others crashed over us. The power of the water was so great that it tore the rope from my hands, pushed me beneath the surface and appeared to hold me down there like some huge, unseen hand. I remember looking up at the sky shimmering through the churning waters and thinking to myself "This is not so bad. It certainly beats struggling with that stupid boat. I'd be happy to die now. I sure could do with the rest."

The next thing I remember, I was being mercilessly slapped around the head by Pete. He had apparently seen me collapse backwards into the water and not re-emerge. He swam like a madman to where I was, grabbed me by the collar (broken fingers and all) and tried to beat some sense back into me. It was while we were both clinging to *Dawn*'s leeward hull, engaged in this life-and-death drama, that we were once more struck by a wave. This one, however, was slightly different to its predecessors. It went under the mainsail, instead of disgorging its foaming mass on top of it. This served to miraculously flip *Dawn* upright. Pete scrambled aboard, dragging my confused body behind. The mainsail, freed from its watery confines, cracked into life, filling with the following wind. *Dawn* took off like a frightened cat, heading directly for shore.

We sailed straight up onto that beautiful, solid, dry, wonderful beach. A crowd gathered. Between them they managed to lower the straining sails and drag *Dawn* to safety. They took Pete and me to the nearby surf shed where they rugged us up and filled us with hot tea. They kept telling us how lucky we were to be alive. I couldn't agree more. In fact, I am sure that I would have died if not for Pete's quick thinking. I was ready to die. I wanted to die. At the time it was clearly an easier choice than to stay and fight that exhausting battle.

Having all but died on that Saturday morning in 1968, I no longer fear death as something unknown. On the contrary, I frequently use that defining experience to remind me of the ease with which any of us can move from life to death, and how we must ceaselessly revel, while ever we can, in that precious, wondrous, tenuous accident we call life.

Love is sharing an ambulance (1970)

I first met Glenys on a blind date in 1969. We fell instantly in love. In those heady days of love's first bloom, we could hardly stand to be apart for an hour, let alone for days at a time. I also loved my Jawa 250 motorbike, and, inspired by images from *Easy Rider*, and the dread of having to decide between my two loves, I often imagined myself roaring off into the sunset, with my beloved Glenys riding pillion behind me, sharing life's adventures and enjoying the sweet taste of motorcycle freedom, together, forever.



Of course, there were many practical obstacles that stood between this noble dream and its eventual fulfilment. One significant obstacle was Glenys's mother. Helen was a wonderful woman but she possessed a seemingly irrational aversion to motorcycles. "There is no way that any daughter of mine will ride on that, that thing," she asserted, gesticulating animatedly towards my newly polished black Jawa, "And that's final!"

What were we to do? We could occasionally borrow the parental car, which was very nice on cold winter's nights at the drive-in, but an Austin 1800 hardly fitted the rebellious, freedom-loving image I had in mind. Surely we couldn't deceive her, could we? We could and we did.

The usual plan was for me to park the offending motorbike around the corner from Glenys's house and I would arrive on foot. I would stay for the mandatory afternoon tea and chat, then announce that Glenys and I were going for a long walk. Helen never objected to the seeming innocence of this romantic gesture, so off we'd go – straight back around the corner where my Jawa was waiting to whisk us off into the sunset. It was the perfect plan.

We would yelp with delight as we leaned through corners, scraping footpegs at twice the posted speed, 250cc of unbridled two-stroke power throbbing beneath us. We would journey to Palm Beach, or West Head, or Gosford, "just for the fun of it". Our dream, at least for a few precious hours a week, was coming true.

Sure, we felt guilty about the deception, but something that makes us both this happy surely can't really be bad, can it?

One problem with our little ruse was the fact that neither of us could dress appropriately, without risking discovery. We were, after all, just going out for a walk. What would we need of leather boots

and jackets on a walk? Neither of us was too worried about this small detail. No harm could possibly befall us, could it? But it did...

It was a Saturday afternoon. We had played out our little lie yet again over Helen's marvellous tea and cakes. We told her we were off on an extra long walk and would be back after dark. We actually planned to ride to North Head to watch the summer evening fall over the Harbour. It was going to be oh so romantic. Glenys and I had managed to smuggle out our jackets, and both of us wore crash helmets, but Glenys was only wearing sandals on her feet... not exactly suitable motorcycle attire.

Of course, we gave this not a second's thought as we wound our clandestine way towards Manly. Nor had we given any thought to the consequences of what lay ahead – just around that next bend, in fact. We had negotiated this particular North Manly corner numerous times before. In fact it was one of our favourites – a sweeping left-hander, two lanes wide with a rare slight camber to encourage an even higher than normal entry speed. It was an ideal corner in which one could play "boy-racer", or scare a newbie passenger, or impress a mate or a new girlfriend. It was, in short, a true biker's corner.

On this afternoon, however, not everything was to go as planned. As we approached the turn, I hung out wide as normal, then lay the trusty Jawa over, guiding her towards the corner's apex. It was only when we were committed to this line that I noticed the oil. Someone had seen fit to empty what looked like an entire sump-full of crude all over the two left lanes – right where we were headed. Both front and rear wheels lost traction in unison, causing a speedway-like sideways skid. Still semi-upright, a fleeting thought raced through my head. "I might just be able to slide us out of this".

No such luck. Down we went with a sickening crash of metal on tar. I could still feel Glenys's arms around me, even as we parted company with the bike. Her grip loosened, however, as she screamed in agony. Her unprotected legs and feet were now grinding painfully into the oily bitumen. I could see her spinning like a demented top behind me. I was still grasping the Jawa's handlebars, probably imagining in my twisted mind that I was still in control. Seeing the sparks flying off the petrol tank only centimetres from my face caused me to hurriedly reconsider my grip on the handlebars (and my grip on reality). I let go.

The three of us kept spinning in our own private trajectories for what seemed like an eternity. "I sure hope no car is coming the other way", I remember thinking to myself, as we spiralled past the oil-soaked centreline. I tried stopping my progress by holding out my right arm. All this achieved, however, was severe pain in my right wrist.

We eventually came to rest, all three of us now on the wrong side of the road. A car had been coming the other way, but had fortunately seen the accident and was able to stop just in time. I noticed the Jawa's front wheel sheltering neatly beneath the car's front bumper. Now that's what I call close!

I called out to Glenys. She was crying with pain. "At least that means she's alive," I thought. People came from everywhere to help us to the footpath and to retrieve my bike from beneath the car. A quick survey of our injuries revealed assorted abrasions and a broken wrist (me), and severe abrasions to Glenys's hands, arms, feet and legs. We were unsure whether Glenys had sustained any broken bones. We sat there seeking comfort in each other's arms, saying little. This certainly wasn't the kind of romantic adventure we had in mind.

Someone called an ambulance, which duly arrived and carted us both off to Manly Hospital. We knew that we could no longer hide the truth from Helen. I called her from the hospital and confessed all. She was, of course, greatly upset, but surprisingly understanding. I suspect that she had known of

our little deception all along, but was unwilling to make an issue of it, knowing how much we wanted to be together, come what may.

With her mother's insistence and a little financial help, Glenys bought a car soon after. From now on we would just have to live out more of our romantically rebellious fantasies behind the wheel of a British Racing Green Mini Minor.

Bombora blues (1973)



I have always loved to sail. In particular, I have always enjoyed the adrenalin-pumping thrill of sailing fast. As fast as possible. This need for speed is the major reason I was attracted to multihulls. Speed, and the elegance of design that uses positive forces to achieve stability, rather than the negative force provided by a tonne of lead in the keel. Thus it was in 1972 that I graduated to a 5 metre Attunga class catamaran called *Ikara*. I just adored this boat, with her gleaming white deck astride navy blue hulls, matched with a huge spread of blue and white striped sails. In even a moderate breeze she was fast and wet – always exciting and sometimes, like in the following story, quite wild and unpredictable...

It was one of those days when most sensible people would be huddled in front of a warm fire with a good book, with their attention only occasionally disturbed by the whistling of wind outside. In fact, the weather had been like this for several days, and had whipped up a decent swell from the Southeast. So decent, in fact, that the Weather Bureau had once more issued a strong wind warning, advising against anyone venturing to sea. But this was Saturday, the day when Pete Smith and I always went sailing. And besides, we weren't technically "going to sea". Just across the Heads. And back. Several times, we'd hoped.

Pete and I met at Little Manly boatshed as usual that Saturday morning, neither of us willing to be the first to suggest that perhaps it was a little too windy and that we would be better off taking in a movie or two. Even the sight of two metre waves angrily scouring the sands of this normally protected little cove didn't deter us from our shared desire to spend every possible waking hour sailing. So we wheeled *Ikara* down to the ominously narrowed shore where we struggled to hoist the flailing sails which threatened to be torn from our grasp with each ferocious gust.

We had to wait for a lull between the sets of waves before we could launch, but after a couple of false starts we eventually found ourselves beating gingerly into the teeth of a 25 knot Sou-Easter. Of course, that was in the relative shelter of Little Manly Cove. As soon as we cleared the headland, we suddenly became more aware of the full meaning of a "strong wind warning". The wind there was solid. Whenever we let the mainsail flap, *Ikara's* beautifully varnished spruce mast contorted so wildly we felt sure it would snap. There was only one thing for it. Pull in the mainsheet to stop the flapping. This action, of course, increased our speed and our instability. Soon, however, we were zooming with increased bravado up the faces of the huge swells marching incessantly in through

Sydney Heads, becoming spectacularly airborne at the crests, crashing down the other side in a flurry of spray. We were both soon hoarse with yelling at the sheer exhilaration of it all.

In next to no time we were in the relatively calm waters in the lee of South Head. We looked at one another, sodden, cold and exhausted. "Let's do it again!" Pete screamed over the wind howling through the rigging. "Coming about!" I yelled in reply, and we headed back towards Manly, this time with the wind at our backs. There is little in life that can match the sheer excitement of a broad reach in a wildly bucking catamaran under far too much sail, being catapulted down the face of a 5 metre wave, propelled to the very verge of control by a solid wall of relentless wind. This was heaven.

Because of our immense speed, this downwind leg only lasted a few minutes, but we took the opportunity between the moments of exhilarating terror to look around. We virtually had the Harbour to ourselves. Even the Manly Ferries appeared to have stopped running. Over our port bow, through the wind-driven spray, loomed the distant, forbidding cliffs of Dobroyd Point. Long fingers of white foam reached manacingly half way up the towering cliff face, bearing grim testament to the power and size of the swells that had travelled half way across the Pacific Ocean to explode so majestically against this headland. We noticed, however, that the waves were breaking long before they reached the cliffs. They were breaking over a shallow stretch of water located about a kilometre or so seaward. This patch of water was marked by a large red warning buoy. This was the site of the infamous Dobroyd Bombora... more colloquially referred to as the Dobbie Bombie.

This Bombie only ran about once a decade, but has brought about the demise of many ships over the years, often with significant loss of life. Pete and I both knew the area quite well, using the "Dobbie Danger Buoy" as a rounding mark for races in calmer times. The site of those huge breaking waves captured our attention for some time, and as we headed upwind once more after gybing at Manly Cove, we both agreed that it would be fun to surf them in *Ikara*. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

We planned to return once more across the Heads then sail over to Flagstaff Point where we would gybe so we could approach the Bombora on port. This approach was preferable since it would allow us to run off straight into the relative shelter of Middle Harbour as we would emerge triumphant from our chosen wave, leaving the angry foam breaking far behind us. This, of course, was how we imagined it would be. The reality of our insane attempt to tame the Dobbie Bombie was to prove somewhat less romantic.



The wild ride from South Head to Flagstaff Point should have served as a warning of the disaster to come. But our sky-high adrenalin levels prevented any such warning message from ever reaching our

consciousness. The difficulty of gybing in such gigantic seas should also have alerted us to the foolishness of what we were about to attempt. But it didn't. So we soon found ourselves hurtling headlong towards that enraged cauldron of foam dwarfing the bright red danger buoy. Pete later confessed that he started to have second thoughts at about the same time as myself – namely as the huge cresting wave towered over us and flung us forward, doubling our speed and taking *Ikara* to the very edge of controllability. But by then it was far too late to do anything about our second thoughts. We were well beyond the point of no return. There was only one way to go now, and that was wherever that wave wanted to take us!

Where it took us was down. Down that mountainous dark face. So far down, in fact, that the wind's howling momentarily ceased and the sails hung almost limp. It was as if they had decided to give up the struggle as they sagged in resignation at their inevitable fate. We had now reached breakneck speed, with our sterns pointing skyward and our bows aimed ominously at the menacing green depths beneath us.

I struggled to turn to port, trying to avoid both bows being speared into the solid wall of water ahead. I only half succeeded. Our starboard bow dug in. With the full weight of the Pacific Ocean behind, the starboard hull disappeared beneath the surface. With the inevitability that follows whenever an irresistible force encounters an immovable object, *Ikara* came to a sickening halt - from over 20 knots to zero in a split second. I clung to the now useless tiller bar for all I was worth, immersed in the chaos of foam as the wave overtook us. Pete was less fortunate. He was flung forward, his only attachment being the thin trapeze wire hanging from *Ikara*'s impossibly overstressed mast. Grabbing at the stay as he sped past only served to open a huge gash in his right hand. He landed in the belly of the now wildly flapping jib, a bloodied handprint marking the precise location.



Miraculously we didn't capsize. I dread to think what might have been had *Ikara* inverted, or even if our mast had broken. We would most likely have been swept up onto those foam-drenched, forbidding rocks where our chances of survival would have been negligible. No, we didn't capsize, and we didn't break our mast. We didn't even tear our sails. In fact, we found ourselves emerging, not quite triumphantly, but emerging nonetheless, sailing miraculously towards Balmoral, just as we had planned. We hollered with the elation and relief. Only something was decidedly wrong. We had a definite lean to starboard. And it was getting worse.

The water pressure beneath that monstrous wave, combined with *Ikara*'s considerable speed-induced momentum had ruptured the main plywood seam half way along *Ikara*'s starboard hull. She was taking in water fast. What could we do? We figured that we wouldn't even make it to nearby Balmoral without sinking, so we hurriedly agreed to come about to position the waterlogged

starboard hull to windward. So far so good, but now we were heading back out to the Heads. With Pete wracked with pain and still bleeding profusely we agreed to sail directly back to Little Manly, past the Bombora and across the Heads. We figured that if we kept the starboard hull airborne then it couldn't take on any more water so we wouldn't sink! This would be a delicate balancing act, but up until now it had been a constant battle with wind and wave to actually keep the windward hull in the water, so we felt confident that we could do it.

Pete, with his shredded hand, was clearly unable to pull on the jib sheet, so it remained cleated for the whole leg. I had to constantly adjust the mainsheet and our direction in order to keep the damaged hull just clear of the massive swells, but not so high that capsizing was likely. Pete assisted by shifting his weight on the trapeze, inboard in the troughs, full stretch when bearing the full force of wind on the crests. Thus we somehow managed to zig-zag our precarious way back to Little Manly Cove. We sailed straight up onto the beach beside the boatshed, starboard hull still flying. We let it down gently, released the halyards and collapsed on top of the gathered sails. We were completely exhausted, but elated at what we had just accomplished.

As we were putting the broken but triumphant *Ikara* away, the sun broke through the scattering clouds and the wind began to abate. Pete's hand even stopped bleeding.

"Wonder what's on at the movies?" Pete enquired.

"Dunno," I answered. "But let's go into Manly and see."

"No argument there!"

Brainwashed in Bali (1975)

The following is an unabridged extract from a Diary I kept during a trip to South East Asia in 1975 – my first journey alone beyond Australia’s shores. It starts on the afternoon of Day 16, which means that I had only been in Bali for a little over a fortnight, and since this was my very first experience of another culture and of the backpacker’s lifestyle, my 24 year-old mind was awash with strange ideas and new sensations. In other words, it was just ripe for the promise of adventure on the high seas, despite the questionable motives for the experience...



Day 16...

Sitting quietly on the veranda attempting to begin writing up the day's happenings, two guys suddenly appeared in the small ring of light. Introducing themselves as Brian and Richard, they had heard of my interest in native boats (Prahus and Jukungs) and had come for some information about purchasing one. Well, to cut a long story short, 6 hours later, after constant, in-depth discussion about everything from boats to infinity, I found myself seriously considering embarking on a voyage that would abound in intrigue, glory, adventure and excitement. Oh yes, and a lot of money. All I had to do was to view some Jukungs with them tomorrow, with the aim of purchasing one, fitting it out for ocean travel, and sailing to various places picking up and delivering stuff. The only problem might be that the “stuff” appears to be mainly Sumatran hashish. At this stage I have given no firm commitment... I am free to make up my own mind to join in the venture or not.

Brian is the most self-confident, intelligent, interesting and amusing character that I've ever met... nothing could ever go wrong with him! He even believes that he can stop the rain using only the power of his mind! We got on famously. Our discussions rarely descended below 30,000 feet. I welcomed such mental stimulation with open arms (and mind) after the frustrations of the limited conversations encountered when you can't speak much of the native tongue. He has been to places and seen things that most of us don't even get to read about. I am sorely tempted to join them in their clandestine “adventure” but I'll bide my time.

A Jukung, is a 20 foot long hollowed-out log with added freeboard, with bamboo outriggers and partial closed-in deck, topped off with a flexible lateen rig made of bamboo, supporting a tatty cotton sail – usually consisting of more patches than sail. To add some degree of seaworthiness to this basic shape, a half-cabin and a plywood catwalk is usually added, but since the main hull is really just a log, this superstructure really is very narrow (2 feet wide at most!).

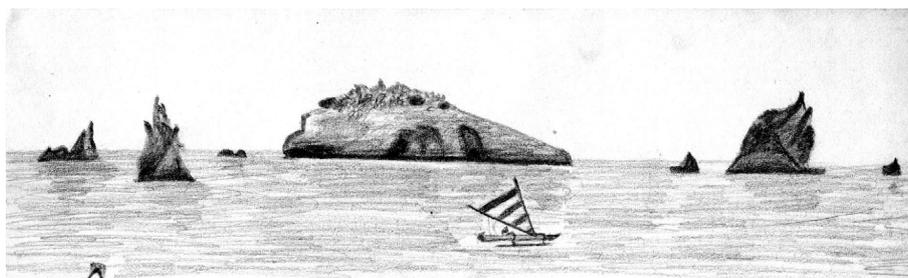
We finally parted company at 2am, both of us somewhat overexcited, to meet 5 hours later when we would sail to Nusa Penida - where Jukungs are reputed to be made.

Day 17...

Four hours sleep then off to Sanur without time for breakfast ... much haggling and hassling eventually gets us a round-trip ride in a Jukung to Nusa Penida and back. This island is only about 20 miles away (you can see it in the distance) so none of us had any "luggage" at all - merely what we were wearing. The scene: one Jukung, old and unpainted; one old skipper and one crewman; one old lady, three Balinese men and the three of us (Brian, Richard and me). Surrounding us were numerous containers of flour, rice, cement, water, beer etc. No one spoke English at all so I had my first crash course in Indonesian - the best way to learn! Brian speaks it fairly well, I a little, but Richard not at all - and I forgot my dictionary. The wind at first was light but astern. Soon we were becalmed but then the wind strengthened from dead ahead. This Jukung doesn't point into the wind at all ... about 60 degrees if there is no chop, 70 as the wind picked up. Result ... 8 hours to do the 20 mile trip.

We landed at the skipper's place on Nusa Penida just on dusk - tired, thirsty and very hungry. On the way our feeble but improving efforts at Indonesian impressed the skipper (Panmade) and others, resulting in a welcome friendship. We were invited to his home (nowhere else to go!) where very strong coffee, rice, and a very small fried chicken was sold to us (a shrewd business man, this captain) - he had a monopoly in this "next-to-deserted" part of the island! Apparently the last white man visited here in 1973 so, of course, we were the objects of a great deal of wide-eyed, open-mouthed examination by Panmade's numerous relatives, children and others. Every breath we took, every word we uttered, was attended to closely. Everywhere we looked we saw dozens of large brown eyes unblinkingly following our every move. The children were delightful - beautiful, in fact. The girls were likewise - round, soft features - all enhanced by that ever-present, glistening white Balinese smile.

We managed to see some clapped-out Prahus and one or two derelict Jukungs. We were a little disappointed at not seeing more. We then settled down three in a bed to get some shut-eye before the scheduled midnight departure. The currents here are fierce, so you must time your voyage carefully. What with dogs (not used to white men too!), chooks, kids and adults barking, crowing, peeping and talking (respectively) none of us could sleep easily. Besides, the mat on which we lay was choc-a-bloc with bed bugs, fleas, cockroaches, beetles and assorted other micro-fauna, all designed to destroy one's slumber. Despite these obstacles, Richard finally managed to doze off. In the darkness of our little hut the swarm of cockroaches busily licking the sweat off his semi-comatose body looked like a warm, enveloping blanket. We didn't have the heart to wake him, so we just let him sleep beneath his squirming, crunchy Blattodean quilt. Besides, looking at Brian and myself revealed that being awake was certainly no guarantee of being insect free! So the two of us continued our fascinating conversations long into the night, punctuated only by the occasional scraping of sheets of ravenous cockroaches from our perspiring bodies. The rest is tomorrow's story ...



Day 18...

A lo-o-ong, eventful day. Midnight found us picking our way seawards through the shallow, sandy channels of Nusa Penida. The threatening clouds in the sky couldn't quite conceal the presence of a three-quarter moon - we could see quite well! Three hours out the clouds threatened no longer ... they poured forth buckets of wind-driven, wet fury. Within seconds the quiet, peaceful, midnight cruise became a balls-and-all struggle for survival. The skipper immediately lowered his frail cotton sail, battened down all loose cargo and hid in his cockpit accompanied by his whimpering crewman! The old woman sat cross-legged on the foredeck, tied by her cloth belt to the mast, sobbing in fear. The three of us were left to our own devices on the heaving, bucking, tossing deck. With nothing but a cheesecloth shirt to keep me warm and a holey piece of canvas for "shelter" I joined the others in their purple-fingered, shivering, goose-pimpled and teeth-chattering coldness (or was it fear?).

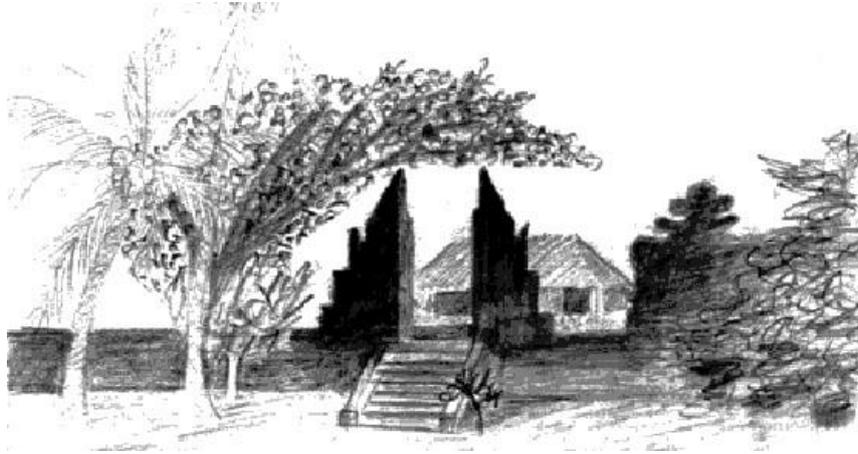
There we were - pitch black, not a light in sight, no steerage way, bobbing about like a large cork, covered with rain and solid salt water (kindly dumped upon us by an angry Vishnu, no doubt), the skipper resignedly afraid, fervently praying to any god that would listen, the passengers cold, wet and lost, and the waves getting decidedly larger. For a very brief moment we could make out the distant light of the Bali Beach Hotel... the only large hotel in Bali. To our consternation, the light appeared to be circling our wretched little craft. We were caught in a huge whirlpool in the middle of the South China Sea! We felt like we were being sucked down an almighty plughole.

Dawn found us in much the same predicament – the welcoming light was, however, countered by an increase in the amount of water aboard. The howling wind soon abated to a mild typhoon, calming the wildly bucking boat enough for us to start bailing out the not inconsiderable amount of water. Even the old lady joined in this task, frantically driven by thoughts of that ravenous plughole below, no doubt. Once we had the hull nearly empty, we raised what remained of our tattered sail and headed for the shelter of a nearby island. We landed on the beach thoroughly exhausted and freezing cold (tropics, huh!). At the rare sight of three white men the whole fishing village downed tools and came to observe these purple, shivering Caucasoids. No one spoke English but the fun we had attempting communication with these beautiful people was incredible. They fed us, warmed us and quenched our thirst. They followed us everywhere ... especially the girls. The beauty of the women here has to be seen to be believed - also their forwardness and obvious desires for promiscuity - without even a hint of embarrassment or inhibition!

We spent a fantastic day viewing the small island, talking with the locals and generally enjoying the pleasures such a paradise as this has to offer. One can see nearly all of Bali from here. Mount Agung looks more incredible than ever (oh, for my sketch pad!). The sun shone on us for most of the afternoon. Brian successfully negotiated to buy the very Jukung that brought us here - all amid such jollity and friendliness that it all seemed to be unreal! The sand, the palms, the coral, the views - all seemed to have come from a dream - a dream of an unattainable island paradise. I could easily see myself spending quite some time (a lifetime?) in a place such as this. The pace of life is almost stationary - in fact, it stopped still when we came ashore! "It is something much more than luck that brought us here", argues Brian. I, of course, must disagree ... we differ in our basic assumptions about fate, luck and "meaning". This only goes to make the subsequent intellectual gymnastics all the more stimulating and interesting. One such animated argument occurred in the boatshed surrounded by a sea of dark brown eyes, all following the action as in a tennis match, not understanding a single word but none-the-less, overtly attentive.

After a beaut dinner of roast chicken and rice (again!) we got to sleep at last in the home of Putu, a fisherman who lives in the hills ... in a beautiful house with a very steep and slippery entrance. We got to sleep in the only two bedrooms the house possesses while the owner and his wife and all their kids slept (get this!) outside the door and window - against all our best intentions and persuasions

they would not come inside! What a privilege the white colour of one's skin is - it sounds like it should prove embarrassing but funnily enough it seems to be very natural - both to us and them! We all slept for just a couple of hours - same problem as previous night (noise) but no bed bugs, etc.



Day 19...

Again we shoved off just after midnight. The wind was about 10 to 12 knots, the sea sloppy, betraying the ferocity of last night's storm. We close-reached to Sanur ... the boat, probably knowing it had its potential owners aboard, excelled itself by performing beautifully. We all learnt a lot about sailing this type of craft ... we sure will need all the training we can get! The sunrise was nothing short of magnificent. It was like the climactic explosion of a thousand skyrockets. For days now I have metaphorically been soaring higher and higher - I have rarely in my life felt as "good" as this - ie. content, happy, excited, scared, free. Alive. As we neared the welcoming shoreline of Sanur Beach, the sun itself exploded into view astern, imitating my soaring spirits, encouraging me onwards to even better things (is that possible?). It is here that the metaphor and the reality depart ... whereas the rocket eventually fizzles and dies my spirits achieved new heights. I really am glad to be alive!

At Sanur I parted company with the other two - they went to begin purchasing materials (and drugs?) for the boat, I went home to rest my weary body and exhausted brain. I had never before realised how exhaustion can be so blissful! I feel a very different person than I was two weeks... no, two days ago!

It is here that this Diary segment ends. In a fog of weariness, I made my way back to Kuta where I told my tale to a friend (Chris). Knowing I had "gone for a sail", and having witnessed the devastation that the storm had wrought on the main island, he had been worried sick about me. On hearing more of my story, he was even more worried about my potential for ending up rotting in some putrid, god-forsaken Indonesian jail for the rest of my life! We calmly discussed the situation and I agreed to "sleep on it".

The next day, thoroughly rested and in the cold light of reason and sense, I firmly decided against a life of crime... What on earth was I thinking? From now on, I vowed, I would seek my thrills in more legal pursuits. I was amazed at how lack of sleep, relentless argumentation and the sharing of the odd life-threatening experience could so easily sway one's long-held beliefs and value systems. I had experienced a very powerful brainwashing technique in action! I returned to Sanur with the intention of telling Brian of my decision, quietly confident that I could now adequately defend my position against the verbal barrage of his twisted, though frighteningly compelling, logic. To my

considerable relief, however, Brian and Richard were nowhere to be found at Sanur, so I left them a note briefly outlining my regret and my reasoning.

I never heard from them again.

The Sussex Street volcano (1976)

You'd think I would have known better, but I was an over-enthusiastic Science teacher, newly released from University, and keen to make a difference. A year of teaching in High School had merely heightened my disillusionment with the education system, and a year spent travelling had further fuelled my sense of independence and disdain for authority, so in 1976 when I started teaching in TAFE, all the ingredients were there for "something" to give way. Little did I suspect it would be a laboratory floor!



Sydney Tech, as it was affectionately known then, was a loose collection of buildings, large and small, old and new, spread around Sydney's CBD. I taught Biology and General Science in one of the smallest, oldest buildings unimaginatively called the Sussex Street Annexe. Built in the 1870's, this two-storey brick and sandstone structure was definitely showing signs of a hard life a century later. In fact it had been condemned a number of times since the 1940's, only to be saved each time from the wrecker's hammer, at first by the inevitable City Council ineptness, and later by its obvious "conservation value". What was originally a Public School had become a government storehouse in the 1930's, a brothel in the 40's and a homeless men's refuge in the 50's. At various other times in its life this once magnificent building had been left sadly vacant, except for the occasional squatter. Taken over in the 1960's by TAFE, it was refurbished to perform its new role as a place of practical science teaching, specialising in Chemistry and Biology.

Four teaching laboratories were constructed, two on each floor. The vaulted ceilings with their huge wooden beams, the dodgy, ancient plumbing, the draughty rooms with their creaky floorboards and the total lack of emergency exits didn't appear to deter the TAFE planners from enclosing the potentially lethal mix of eager young students and dangerous chemicals within its substantial walls. Nor did they plan on the aforementioned over-eager young teacher being set free into this volatile environment.

As a new teacher I was given a numerous forms, booklets, pamphlets and lectures which together formed the voluminous "rules" I was expected to follow throughout my career with TAFE. Being naturally resistant to authority, I duly ignored most of them. One thick, heavily bound tome, however, sparked my interest. This was a book issued by the Department of Education describing all of those

experiments deemed too dangerous to perform in a teaching laboratory. Naturally, in the true spirit of reverse-reverse psychology, I just couldn't wait to try them.

In my younger days I had created more than my fair share of explosions and malodorous concoctions. I particularly recall the flamethrower that could propel its petrol-fuelled conflagrations well over 6 metres; and the empty pineapple juice tin that was launched explosively into orbit (and which may still be up there); and the unbelievably sickening stench of a jar of putrescent Pippis which resulted in the forced evacuation of a whole wing of my school; and the explosive touch-powder that was smeared on the doorhandles and corridor floors of the University Union; not to mention the infamous super-bunger created by taping several "tuppenny bangers" together which, when detonated, yielded a crater over a metre deep. Had they delved more deeply into these more dubious aspects of my previous life, I doubt if my TAFE interviewers would ever have set me free into the chemical cornucopia of the Sussex Street Annexe – with a hardbound book of detailed instructions, no less!

As if one pyromaniac in the old building wasn't enough, I quickly discovered that Michael, the younger of our two Laboratory Technicians, was a fellow "free-spirit". With unrestricted access to the chemicals cupboard, we were like two kids in a candy store. I should have been forewarned of our capacity for serious trouble when I arrived at work one morning to see a fire engine parked across the vehicle entrance. I quickly surmised that their presence was probably related to that brew of "enhanced" touch powder that we had left overnight in its beaker on the bench in the preparation room of Lab 2. Encountering Michael amongst the small group of bemused evacuees on the opposite footpath, he confirmed my suspicions. The dubious mixture had crystallised overnight into a very dangerous, vibration-sensitive form, capable of exploding at the slightest provocation – like someone entering the room! An hour or so later a fireman dressed in a head-to-toe protective suit emerged to announce that he had successfully re-dissolved the offending substance, rendering it harmless. Fortunately for our careers – and possibly our freedom – Michael and I were able to talk our way out of trouble by claiming inexperience and feigning ignorance. And since no one seemed capable of believing that we would be stupid enough to actually create such a dangerously explosive mixture on purpose, we got away with it.

You'd think I would have learnt my lesson after that scare. Not likely! Adrenalin is mightily addictive. It was what happened a few months later that really caused me to re-evaluate my cavalier attitude to safety in the Science Lab...

Because of the remoteness of the Sussex Street Annexe, students often took 20 minutes to walk from their other classes for the pleasure of "doing" Science in our dilapidated building. Apart from this enforced perambulation leading to a significant attrition, (there were many pubs between the main building and our little annexe), it also meant that Science classes were usually 2 or 3 hours long. To any restless teenager, 2 or 3 hours of Science may well seem like a lifetime. Our challenge as Sussex Street teachers was to make our classes as interesting as possible to both attract and retain students – in the hope that they may actually learn something useful in the process.

It was Thursday afternoon. I was teaching General Science in Lab 3, on the second floor of the Sussex Street Annexe. My class had been studying the somewhat dry topic of igneous rocks and on this day I planned to give them a treat. I was going to simulate the growth of a volcano right there in the lab. There was, of course, an entire chapter devoted to this demonstration in the "forbidden experiments" handbook, and I had, of course, reacted the essential ingredients (potassium permanganate, potassium dichromate and glycerol) many times before. In the "classic" version of the reaction, a small mound of yellow powder slowly turns into a hot, fuming cone of black, aerated ash, resembling (Ta-Da!) the shape of a volcano. The sight and smell of this mini-volcano is, of course,

supposed to stimulate and motivate even the most bored student, spurring them on to eventually become a world-famous, Nobel Prize winning geoscientist. Well at least that was the theory.

Being a little bored with this “experiment” myself, I planned to “enhance” this particular volcanic simulation a little. With Michael’s welcome connivance I added a few “unlisted” chemicals to the usual mix. Into the larger-than-normal pile of yellow powder went a pinch of Sodium, a dash of iodine, a sliver or two of magnesium, a sprinkle of aluminium and a few other substances from the chemical store designed to create what promised to be an unforgettable pyrotechnic experience. Those dedicated students of mine deserved nothing less.

Two hours into the otherwise uninspiring three-hour session I felt that the time was right. Examining the crystalline structure of igneous rocks under a cheap, astigmatic, government-issue microscope can only maintain the interest of a post-pubescent teenager for so long. Time to bring out the Big One. We rearranged the room to form a semi-circle of expectant students, with a small, round table at its epicentre. With as much theatrics as I could muster, I revealed the pre-prepared pile of mixed chemicals, ceremoniously carrying it from behind my bench to the little round table on its own tray of asbestos matting. The pile looked somewhat bigger than I remembered assembling that morning, but perhaps that was just my imagination.

As I expected, a couple of students groaned... “Not that pissy old volcano thing again. We did that back in high school, sir!” I reassured them that this was to be no ordinary volcano. “This is going to be more real than the real thing!” I said, not really knowing how prophetic this was to be.

A hush soon fell over the little crowd as I dramatically loosed a few drops of glycerol onto the tip of the chemical concoction. In a minute or so the exothermic reaction began to build. The fumes (described in the Department’s book as “toxic” and “to be avoided”) started billowing from the reaction site. So far it was just like all previous simulated volcano demonstrations. The students who had seen it all before began to fidget. I began to doubt if our chemical enhancements had made any difference. I need not have doubted. The volcano just hadn’t yet reached ignition temperature. However, it soon did.

I knew we were in for trouble when the normally blasé students started edging back from the table. Deep inside the rapidly growing pile of black ash could be seen a fiery-red core of angry chemicals. A series of small, muffled explosions emanated from within this glowing core, ominously bulging the rapidly expanding ashen slopes of the growing cone. The volcano was now over 40 centimetres high, and reaching the limits of its asbestos mat. I nervously started to glance in the direction of the wall-mounted fire extinguisher as I realised that much of the mixture now blanketed beneath the billowing fumes and layers of ash still remained ominously unreacted.

The students, meanwhile, were oblivious to the catastrophe unfolding before them. They were oohing and aahing as if it were cracker night. They were in the throes of congratulating me on providing them with “the best demo they had ever had” when suddenly, from deep within the bowels of the fuming, black mountain a glowing marble-sized blob of molten metal exploded skywards and, following a graceful arc, landed a couple of metres away, on the floor between two very surprised students. Suitably impressed, the whole class burst into spontaneous applause. Simultaneously, the floor burst into flames.

The glowing, pulsating blob had melted its way through the linoleum and was already making short work of the floorboards when I realised that it could easily burn through to the laboratory below. I

quietly dispatched one of my more believable students, Susan, to warn the teacher in Lab 2 to expect an uninvited igneous intrusion through their ceiling, and to clear the area beneath it.

Meanwhile, my students had still not grasped the gravity of the situation. They were, in fact, expressing their disappointment that the volcano, having reached a height of over 60 centimetres, was now “going out”, and the number of explosions was decreasing. I decided that it would be better if I went along with this misguided perception, in order not to create panic.

Fortunately, once freed from its exothermic birthplace, the recently escaped molten blob soon cooled and succumbed to the aged hardwood of Lab 3’s floorboards. I dispatched another student to give the all-clear to those below. Fortunately for my career as a Science teacher, Susan had been too polite to interrupt Lab 2’s teacher, so had not yet passed on the first message. Both students returned upstairs, without anyone else in the building being wise to the potentially cataclysmic events that had just transpired in Lab 3.

The show was soon over. The volcano was now dormant, its explosion-distorted slopes spilling over the edges of the table. The ash was now calmly settling on desks and cupboards around the room. The acrid fumes quickly dissipated and the once-molten, errant blob had cooled enough to allow it to be removed with metal tongs. I had for a brief moment thought of asking the class not to let anyone know what had just happened, but a quick analysis of the room’s mood indicated that they had not seen the incident as I had. They had not recognised the potential for catastrophic conflagration that had just passed. So I decided to act as if everything was perfectly normal, in the hope that they would soon forget it, as they appear to do with nearly everything else they “learn” at Tech.

I sent for Michael to come and help me clean up (ie, destroy the evidence), and I continued with the lesson. After the class had finished and the students departed, Michael filled the cup-sized, charred crater in the floor with Plasti-Bond, leaving a mysterious little circle of discoloration in the linoleum.

Not surprisingly, I have never performed the volcano demonstration, enhanced or otherwise, since.



The lone hydrangea (1978)

Murray's Corollary to Murphy's Law:

The potential for serious injury is directly proportional to the cubic capacity of one's motorbike.

Newly married, my wife Glenys and I had only recently moved into our house at Warriewood. Naturally, we were impoverished ("cash-poor" in the current terminology), yet this lack of funds didn't prevent us from wanting to improve our humble little home. One of these planned improvements was to cover the ageing, cracked cement path at the front of the house with bright new pavers. We chose large, triangular-shaped, orange-coloured cement pavers that were manufactured locally – right near to where Glenys worked in Dee Why, in fact.



We worked out that we needed a hundred and forty of these pavers. This stretched our meagre savings to the limit, but we just had to have them. We hadn't figured on the \$30 delivery charge, though. "No worries", I thought. "I'll pick them up on Tuesday morning, before I start work and save the money." Picking them up, however, would involve a complex shuffling of cars, trailers and bikes, but we figured if all went to plan, I could still be at work before my first class at 2pm.

Basically the plan was this: Glenys would drive the VW Beetle and I would ride my Yamaha trail bike to her work. I would park the bike in her work's car park and drive the car back to Warriewood where I would hitch it to the box trailer and drive back to Dee Why. In Dee Why, I would load the pavers and then drive back to Warriewood where I would unload the pavers, unhitch the trailer and drive back to the Dee Why Library car park. I would leave the car there for Glenys, hop on my bike and be at work in plenty of time. Such a well conceived plan, what could possibly go wrong?

Tuesday morning arrived. All was proceeding to plan so far. Mind you, I didn't allow enough time for me to recover from the sheer physical exhaustion generated by loading and unloading 140 pavers, but we were nevertheless still on track. At least we were on track, right up until the bit about hopping on my bike and heading off to work...

Now the Yamaha DT250 is not renowned as a cantankerous beast, but this morning it did seem to cough and splutter its way to Dee Why, but at least it made it. And I had other things on my mind (The Plan!), so I was not unduly concerned. However, when it came time to "head off to work" that damn bike decided otherwise and stubbornly refused to start. After just shifting 140 pavers, though, I was also in a stubborn mood. I just kept pounding that kick-start lever. Still no go. I tried full choke.

I tried no choke. I tried full throttle. I tried no throttle. I tried gentle coaxing. I tried full-on swearing. Still not a glimmer of life.

I was getting mighty hot and frustrated by now. So hot, in fact, I removed my helmet, leather jacket and gloves so I could kick that bloody useless so-and-so even harder. Under normal circumstances I would have stopped this fruitless jabbing at the kick-start long before it got to this stage. I would have got out my toolkit and removed the spark plug and/or disassembled the throttle mechanism by now, searching for the reason behind this abnormal inactivity. But these were not normal circumstances. I was already exhausted from single-handedly shifting those bloody pavers. It was hot and I was on a tight schedule. All I wanted to do was to start this thing so I could get to work.

It was then I had the fateful brainwave. Sick and tired of wasting my own rapidly depleting energies, why not let gravity do the work? The Dee Why Library Car Park is built on a hill, overlooking Pittwater Road, the main thoroughfare for traffic up and down the Northern Beaches peninsula. All I needed to do, my heat-exhausted brain reasoned, was to select second gear, hold the clutch in, build up speed by rolling down the hill, release the clutch and the engine would instantly spring into renewed life. Voila, I would be back on schedule!

Leaving my helmet, jacket and gloves behind, I begin to execute this cunning little sub-plan. There is only one problem... upon releasing the clutch – nothing. Just the lifeless burble of a two-stroke engine uselessly pumping air in and out. I am nearly at the bottom of the car park hill. Disappointed and exhausted, I look around for somewhere to park, so I can start the mechanical examination I should have started 15 minutes ago. Then all Hell breaks loose.

The long-silent engine suddenly erupts into a cacophony of activity. The unanticipated acceleration instantly lifts the front wheel skywards. All I can do is hang on... it is all happening so fast I can't even reach for the clutch to disengage the engine. My mind doesn't even think of the kill switch... it is somewhat distracted by the sight of a line of cars parked rear to the kerb, dead ahead. I instantly decide to manoeuvre between them, which is not as easy as it might sound, because my main steering mechanism (ie, my front wheel) is still well off the ground. Regardless of how I manage it, I am now bouncing between two cars, my boots at the level of their windows, the engine now red-lined and screaming at fever pitch.

No sooner have I navigated between the parked cars than I am confronted by the next challenge... Behind the cars is a two-tier sandstone block wall, with a combined height of about 3 metres. Between these two tiers is an immaculately trimmed hedge of hydrangeas, about a metre high. The job of keeping those hydrangeas trimmed so immaculately falls to the Council Gardener. I know this, because I can see him now, frozen in fear, secateurs in hand, directly beneath my near-vertical sump plate. As I fly over his head in a cloud of two-stroke smoke I can just imagine what he must be experiencing... there he is, calmly trimming his hydrangeas on this beautiful Tuesday morning, when suddenly this almighty racket erupts in the car park above. A second later this apocalyptic vision of knobbly tyres, smoke and sump guard bursts forth from his beloved hydrangeas, right above his head. What's more it is heading in a not-so-graceful arc towards the six lanes of traffic on Pittwater Road...

I am in mid-air when my focus shifts from the Hydrangea trimmer below to the more immediate problem just ahead. For the briefest of moments I contemplate a spectacular landing and a continued wheel-stand across the six lanes of traffic, by which time I should have regained control and I could be on my way as if nothing had happened. Only three things stand in the way of this wishful plan. First, the rear wheel, unfettered by the constraints of solid ground is now spinning much faster than

the speed of the bike would allow, so any thought of a controlled landing is out of the question – I will be flat on my back as soon as that rampant wheel touches down. Second, I rapidly calculate that there are two chances of riding an out-of-control DT250 across six lanes of traffic without being hit – Buckley’s and none! Last, though by no means least, there is the small matter of that white Holden parked right where my bike intends to land!

I hastily decide that the only course of action is to bail out. I land in the gutter, wedged intimately against the parked car’s rear hubcap. My bike hits the car beside me sideways, leaving a perfectly straight skid mark across both doors. “Now that’s going to be hard to explain to the insurance company!” I think to myself. I scramble over to my motorcycle, now on its side on the footpath, still revving its insides out, spewing smoke and noise, rear wheel gyrating wildly, as if looking for further victims to mark with its knobbly signature. At last I remember what the kill switch is for. Soon there is silence. As my adrenaline level slowly subsides I become conscious of an excruciating pain in my right foot, and a pool of blood around my head. I can’t move. Ironically, I notice, neither can the gardener.

Someone recognises me and informs Glenys that her husband is lying in a pool of blood in the gutter down on Pittwater Road. An ambulance is called, and Glenys accompanies me to the hospital.

POSTSCRIPT

It was a grain of dirt that had wedged the throttle slide wide open, flooding the carburettor.

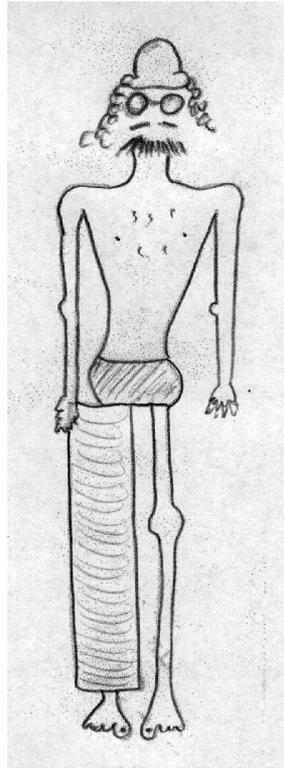
I had broken three bones in my right foot, wheel-standing between the first row of parked cars. (This sketch was done by my father on my 18th Birthday card, commemorating my time in plaster).

The pool of blood was not from my head, but from my hand, cut by the footpath in attempting to arrest my fall.

The groove I cut through the hydrangeas was visible for many years. We still refer to the bush that bore the brunt of my rampant motorcycle as *The Lone Hydrangea*, a play on the name of a popular TV show at the time, *The Lone Ranger*.

I heard that the gardener was somewhat traumatised by the experience, and resigned soon after. At least that’s what I heard.

I never did get to class that afternoon.



Sotto voce (1980)

My friends have often told me, sometimes with no uncertain degree of exasperation, and sometimes with not quite this same choice of words, that I am a “very verbal person”. I don’t deny that, given a choice between a picture and a thousand words, I would take the verbal option nearly every time. And I would probably argue that a thousand words would be far too few. I have been known, on more than one occasion, to go on about something a little too long. But, you see, that’s only because I probably still hadn’t fully made my point... the evidence for which is usually demonstrated by the fact that the other person hadn’t yet come across totally to my (obviously correct) point of view... I think you get the idea. My voice was (and is) an important part of who I am.

Now, if you were a mischievous, if not cruel, deity and you decided to show some smart-alec atheist with verbal diarrhoea just who was the boss, what sort of diabolical punishment would you devise? Exactly... you’d take away his voice. God or no god, that’s exactly what happened to me in late 1980.

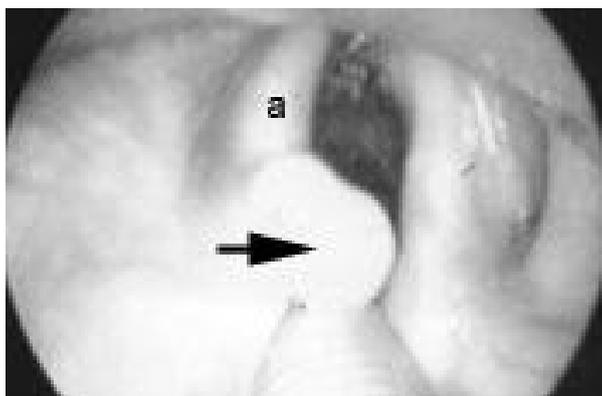
I was teaching Science at Randwick Tech at the time. As is the lot of most teachers, I necessarily had to use my voice constantly, often at high volume for hours at a time. I should have paid more attention to the symptoms and sought help early on, but such wisdom usually only comes with hindsight and besides, I had a job to do and I wasn’t going to let a persistently painful sore throat stop me. Such wishful thinking, however, was not enough to prevent that tiny granuloma from growing on my left vocal cord, slowly digging a small crater on the other cord with every vibration. Denial was insufficient protection against the inevitable.

As the year wore on I would come home from Tech with a throat so increasingly sore that I could hardly speak. Others, most especially my long-suffering wife Glenys, would frequently misinterpret this vocal inability as reluctance to speak. In the complex world of social communication such a non-verbal state is usually symptomatic of moroseness or silent anger or worse, and that is how it would often seem to those around me. There were times when such misinterpretation would actually become self-fulfilling, as my frustration at not being able to fully explain my situation would surface. We would begin to decline invitations for social gatherings. We would rarely eat out at restaurants where I could not raise my voice above the usual background hubbub. I obviously couldn’t continue like this for too much longer, but I always seemed to have an excuse for not seeing a doctor. It was the blood that I coughed up one Saturday morning following a particularly difficult week that finally convinced me.

Dr Alderton was a well-known, well-respected ENT specialist working out of Mona Vale Hospital. He reassured me that the gagging sensation I felt as he thrust his assortment of instruments down my throat was perfectly normal. The fact that he was tightly holding my elongated tongue some distance out of from my gaping mouth, however, prevented me from clearly warning him that this was no ordinary gag reflex that I was experiencing. He quickly discovered this fact, however, as I ingratiatingly threw up all over his conveniently positioned lap. That was some gag! Sponging the evidence of my projectile response to this unwanted probing from his designer trousers, Dr Alderton decided on a different approach. He was going to sneak up on my vocal cords from another direction... through my nose. I suspect that the besplattered doctor took some small degree of vengeful satisfaction from seeing me squirm uncomfortably on account of this unexpected nasal invasion.

Being asked to swallow with a metre of flexible metal stuck up my nose is one thing. Being asked to say “eeeeeeee” or “aaaaaaah” with the same metallic tube thrust half way down the back of my throat

was enough to bring tears to my eyes. And since it didn't bring my stomach contents to his lap, at least Dr Alderton was content with this alternative route to my vocal cords.



The examination clearly revealed the suspected vocal chord granuloma and its companion ulcer. The remedy was to talk less and to be trained to use my voice more efficiently... I was to try intensive speech therapy for a couple of months after which I was to return to be re-examined, at which time we expected to see a significant reduction in the size of the nasty growth on my vocal cords. Operating would be a last resort. Shortly after, however, it was obvious that this last resort was to become the only resort.

The speech therapy did little to relieve the pain. In fact, the unusual vocalisations I was encouraged to make placed increasing strain on my damaged vocal apparatus, revealing new sensations of discomfort and pain. And using my voice less was very much easier said than done. A teacher's voice is his main tool of trade. How could a teacher be expected to teach without talking, especially since I was preparing a class of Biology students for their Higher School Certificate. Within four weeks of first visiting Dr Alderton my vocal cords finally gave up the fight. I found that will-power alone was insufficient to coax meaningful sounds from my aching throat. I could only talk in a whisper, and then only for short periods. And I kept spitting up blood.

A hastily arranged re-visit to Dr Alderton with another uncomfortable probing via the deep recesses of my nasal passages, revealed a significant increase in the size of the granuloma. The vocal cords could now hardly meet without causing more damage. The only option left was to operate to remove the offending growth. It was also agreed to remove my tonsils, which had always caused me trouble, at the same time. We selected a date, the first week of the Christmas holidays. I was to have a new voice for Christmas, or so I thought.

In the meantime, I still had a job to do. My Head Teacher relieved me of all classes but one. I still owed it to my Biology students to properly prepare them for the dreaded HSC. But how was I going to do this with hardly any voice? The answer came from the students themselves... they would do all of the talking. Together we set up a roster, matching revision topics to students. Each student would prepare a lesson on his or her topic and present it to the class. I would be available to help with the preparation but for each presentation I would be a mere observer, offering little more than encouraging looks from the back of the room. Every one of those students rose to this unexpected challenge and easily surpassed every expectation – mine and, I suspect, theirs. These were some of the best lessons I had ever given, they said!

The day of the operation arrived. No stranger to hospitals, I knew the routine quite well, and was frustrated but unsurprised to be eighth on a list of eight operations for Dr Alderton that day. Perhaps

it was the lateness of the day, or the decision to remove my tonsils as well, or the doctor was tired from performing seven operations before even getting to me. Perhaps it was all of these things, but the operation didn't go as expected. In fact, I now suspect that it was botched. No one, not least the good doctor, would admit to any incompetence, of course, so I was sent home with reassurances that all was well. But all was clearly not well.

The promise of a new voice for Christmas soon dissipated amid the agony of violent spasms in my throat leading to uncontrolled haemorrhaging and severe pain. For well over a week I found it difficult to swallow and quickly lost weight. And vocally, the best I could manage was a painful whisper - hardly the easy, resonant voice I was expecting. At a subsequent visit the doctor advised silence "until the hurting stopped". Thus began the longest and quietest six months of my life – three months of enforced silence before the pain subsided, followed by three months of semi-voluntary silence, psychologically driven by the very real fear of the damage recurring.

Those six months of imposed silence were to present me with a number of unique and unusual challenges. Mainly they were to prove a real test of my philosophical convictions and inner strength. Philosophically, I had always embraced the "Silver Lining" model of life, seeing good in even the worst of situations. However, until faced with the reality of losing my voice, perhaps forever, this philosophy had remained rather theoretical and virtually untested. Here, however, was a very real dark cloud, with me deeply embedded in the middle. How could I possibly see any silver lining? How could there possibly be any good in this situation?

And yet the strength of my philosophical approach barely waned. I learnt so much about myself and about others during those long six months, that I'm tempted to confess that I'm almost glad for the experience. Of course, once again it is the wisdom of hindsight that allows me the luxury of that confession. At the time, not knowing when, or even if, my voice would return, I almost wished for a god just so I could have someone to rail against.

So, just what were these priceless lessons I gleaned from that period of enforced quiet? I guess that the most valuable was an understanding of what it's like to have a disability, especially one that is not immediately obvious to the casual observer. The experience was more than that you would get by just pretending to be disabled. At the time I didn't know that my voice would ever return. As far as I knew I was to be permanently silent. When people treated me differently because of my disability, I suspected that I would be treated that way forever. When my disability inconvenienced me, I knew that I'd have to put up with that inconvenience forever. It is that knowledge that I may never again be "normal" that made all the difference to my attitude to having a disability.

How differently was I treated? Let me illustrate with a few examples:

Example 1: Despite the success of the unconventional approach I took with my Randwick HSC Biology class, it was obvious that I could no longer teach in a conventional classroom. I was transferred to the External College of TAFE at Redfern, where the mode of contact with students was more suited to my new non-vocal lifestyle. All students there were off-campus, and communication was mainly via mail. My new boss, Sue, was a kindly, sympathetic soul who greeted me warmly and waited patiently as I wrote my side of our conversation on my ever-present writing pad. When Sue introduced me to the Principal, however, I encountered a more typical reaction to my particular disability.

"Mr Kirwan, I'd like you to meet Kevin Murray, our new Science teacher."

Mr Kirwan was from the old school of TAFE administration. Locked safely away in his voluminous office he rarely encountered the more lowly staff members. It was obvious that he had never encountered any lowly, voiceless staff members... "TELL KEVIN THAT HE IS VERY WELCOME HERE," he yelled at poor Sue, mouthing each word as if she were lip-reading, not once looking at me. I started to write that lack of speech does not mean lack of hearing, and that I could be addressed directly, rather than through Sue, and that Sue wasn't deaf either, but before I could scribble the words onto paper Sue had ushered me outside, pleading pressure of work, but almost bursting with embarrassed laughter. I added Mr Kirwan to the growing list of people who are so uncomfortable in the presence of disabled people that they either treat them like complete dummies, or pretend that they are not even there.

Example 2: Lacking verbal conversation ability, and not knowing any of my fellow workers, meant that it was very difficult to make friends at External Studies during those first few weeks. So I would often eat lunch alone. I would go to the little sandwich shop next door and write my order on my pad:

I ham and salad sandwich on a brown roll, I carrot cake, I orange juice, please.

The first time I presented this note to the shopkeeper I was bemused by his reaction. Slightly embarrassed, he reached across and grabbed my pad, writing on it:

No carrot cake. How about banana?

I was stunned. Like Mr Kirwan he had also assumed that I was deaf... without even trying to talk to me.

Example 3: It was Christmas Day and I was supposed to have my new voice back. Instead I had no voice at all. I found myself sitting at the Christmas Dinner table with a few friends and relatives, surrounded by people joking, laughing and making the usual small talk that people make under such circumstances. I was feeling somewhat ignored, mainly because it was difficult for anyone to have a "normal" conversation with me. Someone made a passing remark about cheese, or dogs, or something. I immediately thought of an enormously funny pun that would under normal circumstances elicit gales of laughter, but by the time I had written it down and held it up for all to see, the conversation had moved on and my now-out-of-context pun was widely interpreted as little more than the demented ravings of an intellectually challenged madman. After a moment or two of uneasy silence, the buzz of conversation returned, and I continued to be ignored.

Example 4: I was riding my motorcycle through Dee Why when I was pulled over by a policeman. He sauntered up to me and requested to see my licence. He asked me, no doubt rhetorically, if I was aware that I was speeding. I reached for my pad and pen and began to write my response. I wrote

I am very sorry, officer, but I am unable to speak. I was unaware that I was doing anything wrong. Sorry.

I handed the note to him. He was clearly taken aback at this unexpected mode of response. He was undoubtedly expecting the usual verbal attack and/or grovel that normally accompanies the pulling over of a young man on a motorcycle. The note took him by surprise. He just didn't know how to react. In the end, after a long minute or so of obvious befuddlement, he cautiously handed back my licence, leaned over in front of me to ensure eye contact, and spoke loudly and deliberately.

“OH, I’M VERY SORRY. JUST MAKE SURE YOU TAKE MORE CARE IN FUTURE. NOW OFF YOU GO. SORRY ABOUT THAT. SORRY.”

Following that little experience I made a mental note to always carry a pad and pen with me just in case I ever again get pulled over by a cop.

What else had I learnt from those six months of voicelessness? I learnt that there are definite disadvantages in having a non-obvious disability. When most people think of disability they think of wheelchairs or physical deformity. A few more enlightened folk may think of intellectual impairment, but normally they would associate that with a tell-tale limp, or an ill-defined, “abnormal” facial expression. As much as I empathise with such people, I feel even more for all those people who bear the burden of a disability that is not clearly visible. They suffer a double whammy. They are not able to easily “advertise” their disability and thus prepare the stranger, who usually responds with some inappropriate reaction once they become aware - embarrassment all around.

I recall the feeling of terror I had when attending a celebratory function for work. The room was jam packed with fellow workers who were being selected at random to stand up and say something inspirational about External Studies. I dreaded being called upon. I just knew I’d look like a complete idiot. How could I possibly explain my silence to a room full of people? Fortunately I never had to try, but the terror of the invisible disability still lives within me.

In the darkest days of that six month period I foolishly took a vow. I vowed that if my voice were ever to return I would not waste a single word ever again. I swore that every word I uttered would be carefully crafted and full of deep meaning. However, my very disability forced me to re-examine the purpose of language, the function and structure of conversation. And I reconsidered the nature of that vow. You see, I discovered that the vast majority of conversation hides its meaning and purpose not in the words, but in the interaction. Conversation is the human equivalent of the mutual grooming you observe in non-human primates. Its main purpose is social bonding. The meaning in the words is often of secondary importance. Miss-time the clever repartee, or delay the relevant response, or offer an incomplete answer, and you are quickly labelled as some sort of social misfit.

I learned much about myself in those silent six months. I discovered inner resources I never knew I had. I discovered patience. I discovered perseverance. I re-discovered my confidence. And with a lot of help from intensive speech therapy and with the support of family and friends, I eventually rediscovered my voice.

POSTSCRIPT

While my voice did gradually return, it never attained sufficient strength for me to return to full time classroom teaching, so I made my career in Distance Learning where lack of vocal stamina was no real disadvantage. Commensurate with the Silver Lining philosophy, I have never regretted that career move.

My fears of the granuloma recurring were realised, however, eleven years later and I had to undergo yet another operation (with a different doctor, of course). The subsequent three months of silence and the year or so of speech therapy triggered unhappy memories of those uncertain times in 1980 but also served to remind me of the inner strengths and positive attitudes I was able to call on to help me overcome that particular ordeal.

The End

